

Lewis' Access to Justice Work Extends Past Bar Presidency

Thursday, August 27, 2009, Vol. 124, No. 168
REBEKAH HEARN | The Daily News

George "Buck" Lewis, a shareholder at the Memphis office of Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz PC, earlier this year passed the gavel of the Tennessee Bar Association presidency to Nashville attorney Gail Ashworth. But he isn't finished promoting access to justice.

Lewis recently was elected vice-chair of the Tennessee Supreme Court's Access to Justice Commission, which was created in March. His "Justice 4ALL" campaign enjoyed widespread support during his 2008-2009 TBA presidency.

Now, Lewis is starting a new chapter as an access to justice provider after his 4ALL campaign has garnered state and national awards and as the Tennessee Supreme Court urges attorneys, legal service providers and local bar associations to make access to justice a primary objective.



PERSONAL CAMPAIGN: Attorney Buck Lewis is continuing his work to make justice available for everyone, an initiative he championed as last year's Tennessee Bar Association president. -- PHOTO BY BOB BAYNE

At the highest level

Lewis will serve a three-year term on the 10-member Access to Justice Commission.

"Our responsibilities are set out in the Supreme Court's new Rule 50," Lewis said. "One of the first responsibilities is to draft a strategic plan and to file it with the court by April 2010. But we will be proposing rule changes and planning educational initiatives and pro bono initiatives as the year progresses."

Some of the changes include the emeritus rule, which would allow retired attorneys or others no longer actively practicing to do pro bono work without having to pay privilege taxes and other fees licensed attorneys have to pay.

If adopted, the emeritus rule wouldn't include only senior attorneys. Lewis said it is meant for all retired attorneys, including, for example, men and women who left practice to raise children.

Lewis said the commission is looking at an analogous rule for law professors who may be licensed to practice in another state but not in Tennessee because they came here solely to teach.

"We're also looking at an initiative for in-house corporate counsel called 'A Call to Action,' which would ask corporate law departments to adopt pro bono policies and consider, when they assign their work to law firms, the extent to which the firm is doing pro bono in the

community,” Lewis said. “This was an approach that was very successful with respect to diversity. In order to get minorities and women into law firms, the corporate clients made that a factor in selecting counsel. It was a very successful model, and we want to try to see if we can use that for pro bono as well.”

Also pending before the state Supreme Court is a pro bono reporting rule that would ask attorneys to report their estimated number of pro bono hours each year.

“That will tell us where the lawyers are volunteering and where the lawyers aren’t volunteering as much,” Lewis said.

All Access to Justice commissioners are involved in a task force. Lewis chairs the Pro Bono Attorney Involvement Task Force, which encourages more attorneys to volunteer.

With honors

On July 31, the Tennessee Society of Association Executives named the TBA’s 4ALL campaign the best statewide program by an association, presenting the bar with the Associations Advance Tennessee Award.

“I see it as a really nice honor for our TBA staff, because the staff really pulled together as a team to make the campaign a success last year,” Lewis said.

Also, the American Bar Association’s Young Lawyers Division gave the program first place for public service. Bar associations throughout the country submit applications for their public service projects and a committee of the ABA’s YLD chooses the most outstanding effort.

The TBA Young Lawyers Division worked a lot on the 4ALL campaign.

“On April 4, of the 45 events we had, about half of them were planned and implemented by our TBA Young Lawyers Division,” said Lewis. “They also did Wills for Heroes, where they wrote wills and advance directives for (first responders). So they really had a big year.”

The awards come during current TBA president and Nashville attorney Gail Vaughn Ashworth’s tenure. Lewis said he knows Ashworth well and she’s “always had a strong commitment to access to justice.”

Ashworth’s decision to celebrate pro bono activities in October rather than April is a good one, Lewis said.

“What happened was that this year ... the ABA decided they wanted to make October the pro bono month, so Gail decided this would be a good opportunity to continue the access to justice campaign and hold it when the ABA is doing it nationally in October,” he said. “And it really is a good idea, too, because our staff is so busy when the General Assembly is in session. I’m really glad Gail decided to do that.”

Taking on more

A new project of Lewis' is a statewide e-mail response venue where indigent clients can log on, answer screening questions and e-mail attorneys who can read and respond anytime.

"We have so many lawyers who can't, for whatever reason, go to a (legal) clinic on a Saturday, and this would allow them to help people by answering e-mails," Lewis said. "There's a bar association in another state that has a bankruptcy e-mail bank like this, but nothing of this scale has been done in the country so far, so that is one of the exciting projects."

He said one of the biggest problems for access to justice is reaching counties where there are almost no attorneys and many of the citizens are poor.

"This would allow them, if they have access to a computer ... to go in and post and e-mail and get some help. And it could be a lawyer in Kingsport helping a client in Lake County, because it would be a statewide Web site," Lewis said.

So many people get turned away at legal clinics that this service would be a boon for those who can't get help through a legal aid provider, such as Memphis Area Legal Services Inc. Harrison McIver, MALS' executive director, recently told The Daily News the organization gets 80 to 100 calls a day.

"My hunch is that a lot of people who are being turned away from legal services would love to have a place to go to find help," Lewis said.

When asked how he felt about his legacy as a pro bono supporter, Lewis passed much of the credit along to others.

"I think we were lucky to have planned that right at the time when the country needed it the most, but I want to make sure and give credit to the Supreme Court," Lewis said. "Without the support of Chief Justice Janice Holder and the courts, we couldn't have gotten nearly as much accomplished as we did."

"Having them be so supportive has been critical to the success of what we've been working on the last year and a half or so."