

Being a Trial Lawyer is Not For the Faint of Heart

BY MICHAEL J. WARSHAUER

As you read this, I'll be halfway through my term as president of GTLA. We will have lived through the election of every single politician in Georgia — 236 members of the General Assembly plus the Constitutional officers, including the Governor and Attorney General. We will have been involved in more than 236 races with chances to make new friends and potentially chances for our enemies to get stronger.

The election is 40 days away as I write, so I have no idea how we did. Did we do enough to protect the Civil Justice System? Did we contribute enough money? Did we work to help those who believe in justice get elected? Did we battle to defeat those who want to socialize justice at the expense of the rights of individuals and small businesses? I don't know. I hope so. But I do know this: I know that I'm proud of what so many GTLA members did during the election season, and I'm looking forward to what GTLA members will do in the upcoming legislative session.

I'm proud of the many GTLA members who participated in the Directed Giving Program and made countless direct contributions to political campaigns. I'm proud of the hundreds of our members who contributed to the Civil Justice PAC, Inc. In fact, more than one-third of us contribute to the PAC. That level of commitment exceeds that of virtually every other state. I'm proud of our members who went to the Political Summit and offered ideas on how to improve Georgia's Civil Justice System. I'm proud of the many GTLA members who reached out to legislators and asked how we can help. And I'm proud of the many members who opened their homes, offices and clubs to raise money for worthy candidates and causes.

What I hope is that those of us who didn't do our share in the past will do so in the future. All of us should pull an oar on the boat that is called Civil Justice. To those who sacrificed nothing — well, if new enemies were elected and friends defeated, blame yourself. If fees are capped and working people can't find lawyers to take hard cases, blame yourself. If the Constitution is amended to cap damages, blame yourself. But, after you're finished blaming yourself, do the right thing and join the more than one-third who did their share. Participation matters. It's never too late to grab an oar, the largest you can manage, and pull our boat to safety. Indeed, now is the time.

Now that I've potentially offended about two-thirds of you, let me tell you more about these past six months and what we have accomplished. A personal letter went to every single candidate who was running for the legislature. I met with many of the major candidates for governor. I took countless calls from politicians who needed our help and even had a productive meeting with the president of the Medical Association of Georgia. I tried to answer a lot of tough questions while walking the fine line between candor, political savvy and political suicide for our



organization. With the help of our Executive Committee, a Council of Past Presidents, and our Political Director Bill Clark, I made some tough political decisions. Time will tell if I made the right decisions, but I can assure you that I tried to get it right.

In addition to the PAC and the Directed Giving Program, GTLA started some new initiatives that we hope will bear fruit when the General

Assembly meets. We had our first Political Summit to educate our members about the political process and lay the groundwork for a long-term political agenda. We contracted Jason Rooks to join our lobbying team, which already includes Jim Collins. Thanks to the work of Micah Gravley, we had dozens of candidates, local and state-wide attend TLA meetings all over the state. And, we hired a professional, Wendi Clifton, to manage our new "236 Project" and help with our new Lawyer for the Day Program.

The 236 Project seeks to ensure that every member of the General Assembly, not just the "key leaders," has a connection with a trial lawyer who can help them understand Civil Justice issues. The key word is EVERY. Every member of the General Assembly matters. As a result, we have more and better access to Representatives and Senators than we have ever had. More importantly, we have an organized method of insuring that all 236 members of the General Assembly can be reached by "their" trial lawyers who will be able to deliver our message effectively and efficiently.

We have also laid the groundwork for a Lawyer of the Day Program, which will ensure that we have lawyers at the Capitol every day of the legislative session to discuss our issues and provide support to those who want to ensure that the legislative agenda is sensitive to Civil Justice ideals. I hope you will volunteer to take part in this program.

In addition to all of that, we have created a long term legislative program to defend against the attacks on Civil Justice, and to pursue the passage of laws that will improve access to the courts. I am hopeful that in my remaining months I can convince more of you to get involved; and that together we can make the people of Georgia understand that trial lawyers really are the true protectors of their right of access to the courts. In the meantime, if I struck a nerve — good. Maybe, it will prod you to action. Protect your profession, your clients and the citizens of this state. GTLA needs you, and you need GTLA. ●