GEORGIA LAW AND LEADERSHIP SUMMIT: UGA Alumni Share Practical Advice with Students

The "principled lawyering" theme continued Law Day afternoon with the "Law and Leadership Summit," a town hall-type forum focusing on service to Georgia’s small to mid-sized communities. Co-sponsors of the project were the Law School Association Council Special Events Committee and the Georgia League, a student organization dedicated to legal and civic leadership for rural communities.

"Big isn’t necessarily better; it’s just bigger," Albany trial attorney Robert Goldsmith (J.D. ’80) told students. "Growing up somewhere and coming back home to practice is about as rewarding as it gets."

Cathy Harris Helms (J.D. ’86), who described her career as the "old-time country practice," concurred. Helms lives on a farm and practices in a two-person firm with her husband, Jeff (J.D. ’86). They don’t specialize, but handle "whatever walks through the door, basically," sometimes doing the work pro bono or being compensated with a mess of fish or leg of venison. She and her husband are active in civic organizations and coach the local high school moot court team.

"In small towns, lawyers are still respected," Helms said. "They not only work for people, they are involved in the community."

More than 200 students attended the afternoon forum, which explored the issue of law and leadership in two segments. Audience members received a copy of the first Georgia League Report, containing student articles on legislation and court decisions relevant to smaller communities. The report will be distributed to Georgia’s rural policy makers.

Members of the first panel included: Goldsmith; Helms; Matt Flournoy (J.D. ’85) of Marietta; Jimmy Franklin (L.L.B. ’64) of Statesboro; Sam Inglesby (L.L.B. ’64) of Savannah; and Jim Smith (J.D. ’81) of Macon. They agreed that while sacrificing the higher pay and convenience of metropolitan practice might not be for everyone, it had been the right choice for them. All cited quality of life, community involvement, diverse and challenging cases and independence as contributors to their satisfaction.

“One of the real gratifying things for a young attorney about small-town practice is you’re not going to be stuck in the library doing research for any length of time,” said Franklin. “You’re on the front lines right off the bat.”

The second session dealt with Georgia’s changing demographics, and how legal leadership could help reverse the negative trends in some counties. Georgia is the nation’s fourth fastest-growing state in real population numbers, demographer Doug Bachtel of UGA’s Department of Housing and Consumer Economics, told the crowd. However, he added, decades of out-migration from rural counties has taken its toll: Currently, every farm family in the state of Georgia could be seated in Sanford Stadium for a football game; nearly a third of Georgia citizens do not have a high school diploma; and residents in many counties live in poverty.

"We’ve got to do a lot to catch our Georgia up with the other Georgia," Terry Turner (J.D. ’80), former mayor of Baxley, responded.

Tifton district attorney Paul Bowden (J.D. ’80) concurred. "If you choose to practice in those rural areas, you’re going to be called upon to help solve some of the problems we face every day," Bowden said. "People in rural Georgia expect you to live up to those responsibilities because they know you personally — they see you at the grocery store, church or civic clubs. You’re an important cog in the wheel to improving rural demographics."

Participants in the second panel included: Bachtel; Turner; Bowden; political scientist Charles Bulloch; Max Lockwood of the South Georgia Chamber of Commerce; and Greg Fender of the Georgia Municipal Association.