



LEGAL PROFESSIONALISM IN THE LAST 50 YEARS

Submitted by Melvin Wright
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When I graduated from Wake Forest Law School in 1973, I was so happy to become a lawyer. I had clerked for a firm in Winston-Salem while I was in law school and I learned the importance of civility and professionalism.

In my first or second year of practice I was asked to write my first appellate brief. I had done research for other lawyers but this was my first solo brief and I was nervous but excited. I was trying to draft the brief in addition to the other cases I had been assigned. All of a sudden, I realized that a discovery response was due in a couple of days in another case and I was worried that I would not be able to finish the response before the appellate case deadline. I called Jim Kelly, the lawyer who was on the other side, to tell him my dilemma. Jim could not have been more accommodating. He said he knew how I felt but not to worry and he gave me an extra 30 days. This was one of my first lessons in Professionalism. It was almost 50 years ago but I remember it as if it was yesterday. Jim Kelly, who has always been an outstanding lawyer in my mind, taught me a wonderful lesson that I have never forgotten. Treat others as you would like to be treated.

I keep hearing that lawyers are less respectful today than 50 years ago. Putting everything on social media can easily lead to a violation of confidentiality. Substance abuse and alcohol abuse seem to be getting worse. Too many lawyers are trying to become the “meanest” lawyer in town to generate more business. What is the answer?

Be prepared! Be respectful! Be a zealous but honorable advocate. Treat every client as if they are the most important client in your office because each client feels that their case “is” the most important case you have.



If you are an older experienced lawyer, offer to mentor and help new lawyers who have just joined the Bar. Visit local high schools in your area and explain the legal system and answer questions regarding the law. Volunteer to be on the Court appointed list and take pro bono cases when you can. Finally, always try to epitomize professionalism. Professionalism is doing the very best you can in every legal situation you encounter.