Young lawyers, new challenges

Fresh-out-of-law-school graduates looking to hang their shingles out for the first time may benefit greatly from the experiences of those who came before them—and that is where the state bar associations come in.

These professional affiliations often set up special mentoring programs and workshops to acclimate those newly admitted to the bar to the legal community as quickly as possible. These groups offer young lawyers ways to fulfill the career goals and dreams they had in law school, such as impacting policy and serving the community, and perhaps most important, resources to understand better the practice of law as a business.

“When you are a young lawyer and you are just starting out and, just ‘magically’ because the state bar confers upon you a law license, there’s still a lot that you don’t know,” said Rich Wilson, elected chairman of the Young Lawyers Section of the West Virginia State Bar.

Any West Virginia lawyer 36 years old or under or any attorney who has been practicing the law for less than 10 years in that state is automatically admitted to the Young Lawyers Section, according to Mr. Wilson.

“When you come out of law school, you have a significant learning curve,” Mr. Wilson said. “In law school, they equip you with the basics—where to find information, how to find it—but the real education comes from getting out there and talking to practitioners.”

A 1991 graduate of West Virginia University College of Law in Morgantown, Mr. Wilson became a solo practitioner on April Fool’s Day in 2003 as a personal injury lawyer specializing in medical malpractice and nursing home negligence.

“The modern practice of law, obviously, has changed drastically in the last five years, let alone in the last decade. And one of the big issues that the bar association is looking at is the provision for online computer legal research,” Mr. Wilson said.

The Young Lawyers Section provides a forum in which young lawyers can network with other lawyers in the state, as well as a two-volume practice handbook that gives a sound foundation to young attorneys by detailing every area of the law in West Virginia.

“There’s 36 or 37 different chapters ranging from oil, gas, and mineral rights to insurance law to Social Security law. It’s quite a good starting point for the young practitioner just coming out,” Mr. Wilson said.

The West Virginia State Bar is the organization of all lawyers licensed to practice law in West Virginia and exists to serve members, the legal profession, and the public.

Whether or not the West Virginia State Bar should conduct random audits of trust accounts managed by lawyers and how best to provide civil legal services to the poor are just some of the issues facing a new generation of attorneys.

“Young lawyers have stepped up to the plate and weighed in on these issues, and that’s vital,” said Mr. Wilson, of Wilson Law Offices in Moundsville, WV.

“The best thing young lawyers can do is avail themselves of the opportunity to create policy, to create a legacy for themselves that they will, in the future, have to deal with.”

Pete Kurelac practices law with his older sister, Patricia Kurelac, in Moundsville, WV. A 2004 graduate of the Appalachian School of Law in Grundy, WV, he will automatically become a member of the Young Lawyers Section of the West Virginia State Bar.

“Communication with clients—when first they come into the office, where to begin with clients, building a rapport—that’s something I could use help with because, in school, it’s just ‘black letter law’ that we’re learning,” Mr. Kurelac said.

The 25-year-old attorney admits life after law school may be a bit daunting at first for the uninitiated. But as one of the soon-to-be 1,800 young lawyers of the West Virginia State Bar and its 4,500 members, he will definitely not be alone in his professional growth.

“There wasn’t any magical wealth of knowledge that entered me as soon as I passed the bar,” Mr. Kurelac
said with a self-effacing laugh.

The West Virginia State Bar offers a DVD to its members as part of its "Bridge the Gap" program, which consists of important presentations on the practice of law in that state’s court system, legal ethics, and office management.

Respected members of the state’s judiciary and the legal profession are the speakers in the program. And every newly admitted West Virginia State Bar member is required to partake in the "Bridge the Gap" program.

“It’s like learning to walk all over again,” Mr. Kurelac said. “We’re in the ‘classrooms of the world’ now, and it’s a little bit intimidating to know that it’s people’s lives you’ll be dealing with and to have that responsibility—and their life—in your hands."

Committees focusing on mentoring, practicing law, and operating a solo practice are just a few of the guiding forces that may be found in the Young Lawyers Section of the West Virginia State Bar.

"It just has exposed me to so many opportunities," Mr. Wilson said. "It’s just an incredible networking resource that opportunities can’t help but find you."

Angelique Marks, chairperson of the Young Lawyers Section of the State Bar of Michigan, works as in-house counsel for Handleman Co., a music distribution company in Detroit.

"One of the big things we do is educational programs to help young lawyers make the transition from law school, where they had academic advisors and all kinds of support, to working long hours in the professional world," Ms. Marks said.

For example, the Young Lawyers Section of the State Bar of Michigan holds legal writing and financial planning seminars for its young lawyers, who are age 36 or under, and/or who have been practicing law for less than five years.

"Perhaps the biggest area of dissatisfaction for young lawyers is just how time consuming the practice of the law can be, so a lot of our seminars bring members from the senior bar out to do presentations for young lawyers, so that they know there is hope at the end of the rainbow," Ms. Marks said.

"We just recently had a seminar called 'Can You Really Have It All?' as kind of a career-development discussion program for young women attorneys, so we try to do programs that really meet the needs of young lawyers."

The professional affiliation holds arbitration training and federal practice sessions as part of its programming, community outreach, and mentorship mission.

"Most young lawyers still have that vision of changing the world, so we try to do a lot of community outreach, community service things: from feeding the homeless to publishing brochures on small claims court," Ms. Marks said.

"Also, this year, we tried to develop a landlord-tenants' rights handbook for people who are affected by the court system and several advocacy programs for high school and junior high school students throughout the state of Michigan."

The Illinois State Bar Association also has a Young Lawyers Division that acts as a resource center for their educational and professional needs. The division sponsors volunteer activities such as the solicitation of money and toys for children’s waiting rooms in courthouses.

"I think a lot of young lawyers come out of law school believing that they are prepared to be a lawyer, that they know what they’re doing, and for some that’s making great money and for some that’s having that one case that changes the world," Ms. Marks said.

"But the reality is once you graduate from law school, you’re still in the learning stage. It takes, some say, 10 years but at least five years to really get a feel for how to become a good lawyer and to learn the practical issues of practicing the law."