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Community organizer

Ways to come together as a community in our hybrid times


Cooper

By Miles B. Cooper

The lawyer watched the swirl. Lots of people at the gala, celebrating the great outcomes community members had achieved for their clients. It felt foreign to the lawyer in certain ways. It had been years since the lawyer had been to an event like this. Not the lawyer's cup of tea. Yet important – important to show respect for those whose efforts in courtrooms raised the bar for everyone and important in maintaining community. Worth the social discomfort, and even worth staying up past one's bedtime…

Commune

I was recently talking with a defense lawyer about the conferences held by the defense bar. The lawyer commented on how collegial, collaborative, and helpful plaintiffs' lawyers were to each other and how the defense bar simply did not help each other out in the same way. Sure, we might all see the tired "Don't say Reptile" defense motion in limine (now a bit more dinosaur than lizard but, hey). But generally, the defense lawyer was correct. We plaintiffs' lawyers share material freely. We help other lawyers achieve better results for their clients. Better results for others help everyone. A great result on what the insurance industry views as a defensible case or a low-value injury means the next lawyer who has a similar case has a better chance of getting a just outcome. In certain ways our efforts are communal.

So, how can we help each other out? In myriad ways. Some require little effort. Others take more. Keeping current on the plaintiffs-only listservs generally takes little effort. Responding to a post to help someone out takes a little more. So does digging up a helpful brief. But consider the times someone has done something similar to help you. Along the same lines, make and take phone calls. Yes, a lost art for some but voice communication about a similar case, difficult opposing counsel, or an expert can convey much more information than an email or simply sending over an exemplar.

As we discuss materials, consider adding two steps to the case-closing procedure. First, after evaluating the case for confidentiality and protective orders, review the expert depositions. Submit the defense experts to TrialSmith to expand their database so that we all have prior depositions for our usual suspect experts. Second, write the case outcome up and submit it to all the verdict and settlement publishers, especially California's own JuryVerdictAlert.com (same publisher as this magazine). This helps others out there with similar injuries and incidents by providing comparables. It also benefits the handling firm. The result can be used on the firm's website and in social media outreach.

Meet and greet

Our deeper community building comes from actual human encounters. This includes presenting and attending continuing legal education events, going to conferences, and attending bar socials and dinners. For some of us introverts and non-drinkers (who, me?), these can pose a challenge. Yes, and they remain worthwhile. If social events are not your thing, there are strategies (see Plaintiff December 2022's column, Work the room: https://plaintiffmagazine.com/recent-issues/item/work-the-room). One doesn't need to attend every event. But I recently recognized that my personal decision to prioritize my comfort over participation in the broader legal community was selfish. I decided to get back out there.

For those seeking deeper connections, consider coffee, lunch, and walking catchups. The former requires no explanation. The latter are gaining popularity. Get together with that colleague you've been meaning to catch up with, get outside, and get some steps in. It is amazing how the ideas flow when one is properly ventilated.

Extra credit

For those overachievers – and that's likely most of you – consider content creation. Turn that brief into an article for Plaintiff and publish it. Participate in a podcast. There's incredible content that can supplement mentoring to help one become the best lawyer possible. Creating that content helps one master it, leaves breadcrumbs for those pursuing the same path, and helps weave together the dispersed threads of our hybrid community's fabric.

The other extra credit method? Take on leadership positions. We do good and we do well in part because we have strong associations at the local, state, and national level. I recall Cotchett Pitre & McCarthy's Niall McCarthy saying years ago that one must contribute time, talent, or treasure. Of those, time can be the most precious.

While community contribution is important, it cannot become a full-time job. Determine the methods that bring you joy and balance those against how much time you have available. Recognize there are periods in one's life where one can contribute more and where one can contribute less. An example: One's kids will only be young once – that's a time to participate more in their community. Balance the books when one becomes an empty nester.

Outro

Back to our lawyer at the gala. The lawyer stayed up well past bedtime, enjoying the event far more than expected, and even went to the afterparty. Seeing old faces for the first time in years warmed the lawyer's heart. This was indeed a fine community.

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