

“The Foundation Fellows Program is the opportunity to give back as a lawyer, as part of our professional responsibility, to support those who would otherwise not be able to be represented or aided without our help.”

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“Being a fellow is a privilege, honor and responsibility.”

An interview with John (“Jack”) Liber by Pamela N. Hultin on May 19, 2006.

Jack Liber is currently Of Counsel at Spangenberg Shibley & Liber LLP. He was President of the CBA in 1997-98. Under his leadership, the CBA celebrated its 125th anniversary, launched the Education Initiative partnership with the Cleveland Municipal School District and the CBF's 125th Anniversary Fund raised more than \$125,000 to support the Education Initiative and other public outreach efforts in the community. He is a Gold Fellow of the Cleveland Bar Foundation.

What was your initial involvement with the Cleveland Bar Foundation?

When I became the president of the Cleveland Bar Association, the Cleveland Bar Foundation had been in decline and was foundering. I along with the CBA Board of Trustees decided to use the occasion of the 125th Anniversary of the Cleveland Bar Association as a rallying point for increasing the endowment of the Foundation and the pro bono involvement of lawyers in the Association. At that time the Foundation was particularly focused on the Cleveland Public Schools and the moot court competitions for the students. During that initial fundraising, tied to the CBA 125th Anniversary Celebration, we secured a pledge from the Corporate Cleveland Round Table to match the contributions to the Foundation from lawyers on a dollar for dollar basis and we ultimately raised \$125,000 for the Foundation with that help. My wife and I were among those who agreed to make a significant initial contribution, and that is why I am proud to be a Gold Fellow now. Unfortunately, since that time, until the recent Rock the Foundation event in March of this year, the Foundation hadn't been successful in motivating Bar Association members to actively support their Foundation. Perhaps that lack of participation was because they didn't understand that the Foundation was the charitable arm of the Bar Association. I see that that message is getting out now, and we elected more than 20 new fellows to the Foundation this year.

Why do you think it is important for individual members of the Bar Association to become fellows?

Being a fellow is a privilege, honor and responsibility. Fellow status is a privilege because to become a fellow you must meet certain practice criteria and be nominated to fellowship level by an existing fellow. It is an honor because the Association is very appreciative of the contributions that we fellows

fellows
spotlight

make to the Foundation by giving us special recognition during the year. It is a responsibility because as lawyers we have an obligation to give back to the community that we serve and that provides us with our livelihood. It is part of our professional duty to the public to be sure that there are programs available to bring justice to everyone. I am hopeful that many more Bar Association members will see becoming a fellow as the sought after honor and responsibility it is for those of us who are fellows. The Foundation Fellows Program is the opportunity to give back as a lawyer, as part of our professional responsibility, to support those who otherwise would not be able to be represented or aided without our help.

What can the Foundation do with the pledges generated by the Fellows Program?

If the Foundation becomes as well endowed as those in Colorado, Arizona or that of the OSBA, we will have the opportunity to reach into the community to more adequately support the Justice for All programs, such as those in the Cleveland Public Schools, as well as to provide support and funding for other unrelated charitable programs such as the Homeless Program, Legal Aid or OCTOC. The Bar Association's Justice for All Committee seeks grants for the charitable and pro bono works of the Association through the Foundation. The permanent endowment funds will grow with the addition of each new Fellow and the endowment provides a stable investment vehicle into the future to earn interest income to fund many other needed programs to benefit the Greater Cleveland Community. Other Bar Foundations have huge Fellow memberships totaling nearly 25-50 percent of their Bar Association members as Fellows. There is no reason why the CBA members should be any less involved in the CBF, which is the charitable arm of the CBA. The CBF Fellows yearly pledge contributions are modest (various levels of \$250, \$500 or \$1000 per year for 10 years) and the benefit to the community is potentially huge. By increasing involvement by only 10 percent of the nearly 5,000 members of the CBA each year, we could easily achieve a multi-million dollar endowment within a few years and be able to broaden the scope of our support and funding efforts.

What challenges do you see to the Cleveland Bar Foundation for the future?

There is a constant difficulty in raising money from lawyers in general. As a profession we are blessed with the ability to make good incomes and to do good things for our clients in courts of law and in business. Yet, as we become financially successful we are often less willing to part with our money for purely charitable reasons or to make efforts to assure that the poor, or otherwise needy, are provided for legally. Bar Foundation work seems to be a tough sell generally and that is a real problem. As a fellow we have the opportunity to see where the money we give goes and to monitor the actions of the Foundation Board of Trustees. We can suggest charities that may need some support to the grant committee. Participation in the Fellows Program can reduce the jaundiced view that a lawyer may have about where the money actually goes and increase participation.

What is your fondest memory of a Foundation sponsored event or program?

A school teacher from Shaw High School came to us with the Street Law Program. In supporting this program we were able to provide funding for 13 inner city kids to fly to Washington, D.C., for a week's stay at Georgetown University Law School for a legal summer camp. I went to the airport with Mary Groth to see them off and watched the awe in their eyes as they waited for their flight. Many of them had never been to an airport, let alone on an airplane. As part of their experience they were required to write a paper about what they learned and I cherish those accounts to this day. This was a thrilling experience for me and for Mary.

What place does philanthropy have in your practice?

I am very proud of the legacy of my firm. Craig Spangenberg and Norman Shibley provided the gold standard for us on how to meet your professional responsibilities, including involvement in charitable and educational activities. My firm commitment to the Foundation and other charitable activity continues through the actions of the younger lawyers who understand that "giving back" is a required part of being a professional. The practice of law is not a job, it is a profession, and we support our profession by our gifts. ■