



Well . . . How Did I Get Here?

by Bill Powers

Call it what you will. Luck. Common Sense. Karma. Providence. I truly don't know why I went to Ocean Creek* in 1995. I don't know what, if frankly ANYTHING, interested me about NCATL or the Academy, as we used to call ourselves.

I didn't know a soul. I didn't know any of the causes. I had never been to any non-state-sponsored CLE.

But I went. I watched a lot. I listened. I learned. I remember seeing Wade Byrd roll up in his convertible Jag, with his brown linen slacks, white linen shirt, flowing locks, and newly lit cigarette. I remember seeing a fabulous band called Harmless Error—not realizing they, too, were attorneys.

I remember seeing this older gentleman dancing the night away. His name was Mr. Thorp. I won't say he had mad skills, BUT he was the first person I had ever seen dance as if no one was watching.

I remember going to dinner, sitting with this incredibly affable attorney. He made me feel welcome. His name was Doug Parsons. He's "Your Honor" now.

I remember stocking up on what the young-uns nowadays call "swag." Actually, that's probably one of things I remember most. Ok, for you Boomers and Gen X types, you can sit back for a moment and relax. I need to give these kids with the "sweet J's" some background to explain why free pens and highlighters stood out to me. At my first Convention, we were still using typewriters and white-out. There were no cell

phones. Well, there were mobile phones, but they looked like carry-on luggage. We called them bag phones or car phones.

They were crazy expensive. Byrd probably had one in that Jag of his. We wrote notes, basically everything, on legal pads. We had to hand-write our thoughts and arguments before the arduous process of typing began.

There really wasn't an edit feature, except for a red pen. There wasn't spell check, except for a *Blacks Law* and *Websters*. There was no cut-and-paste. Well, there was cut-and-paste, but it involved scissors and glue or tape. We had books for legal research. We used highlighters to mark important text on the cases we copied on the Xerox machine at the Law Library. We used a LOT of pens and highlighters. I remember getting near a year's supply of those things at that first Convention. That was a HUGE financial boon for me.

Yo, Millenials, that was sick ROI at the time.

#SickROI

#NCAJSwag

That bounty of pens and highlighters lasted normally about 10 months . . . which was about the same time we started getting membership renewal notices and reminders about the upcoming Convention.

So, I don't remember the CLE topics, or the speakers, or the written materials. I don't remember knowing anything about

Taken from June 20, 2016 President's Gala speech, Wilmington, N.C.

the mission or what the Academy did. I take no joy in saying that; yet, it is relevant to my question: **Well, How Did I Get Here?**

In our differences and diversity we may bend, but do not break. In our differences and diversity we will not just survive, but excel.

Of course, that was true about my career as a whole. It would be disingenuous to act like being an attorney was a life's dream or my "chosen avocation."

I didn't really choose anything. I fell into it. Thank God for that. During that time and at that age, I was pretty much focused on just three people: me, myself and I. There was no grand scheme or greater purpose or hope of becoming a better lawyer or human being.

But, somehow I kept coming to Academy events. Year after year. Convention after Convention. I met lawyers. I met lawyers I liked. I met lawyers I admired. I met lawyers I wanted to emulate. They were all so individually different. They came from different backgrounds. They were different ages. They practiced in different parts of North Carolina. They did civil work. They did criminal work. They were women. They were men. They were black. They were white. They were people with disabilities. They were able bodied. They were politicians. They were a-political. They were financially successful. And not so much.

I was blown away: **How was it that I liked SO many people whom were seemingly random as a whole?**

I could not see the common denominator. The metrics eluded me. To call me obtuse or situationally unaware at times is being kind. I was the kid who never knew when summer vacation started. I didn't know when school started in the fall. I remembered science projects the night before they were due.

It took me years to realize this: The smartest, luckiest, and best decision I ever made was to join the North Carolina Academy of Trial Lawyers, now the North Carolina Advocates for Justice.

It made me a better **lawyer**. And more importantly, it made me a better **person**.

There is an old saying, "A house divided cannot stand." How is it that this house of oddballs from such seemingly

divided passions, practices, politics, and predilections could stand? Civil Lawyers AND Criminal Lawyers in one group? THEY could support one another, their causes, and carry their respective banners?

Truth be told, anyone who has served on the NCAJ Board of Governors, and to greater extent the Executive Committee, probably still occasionally asks themselves those very questions. I know I do.

Whenever I think we will be put asunder due to some ideological difference, we get through it.

We talk.

We reason.

We bicker.

We argue.

We pick on Dick.

OK, we mostly pick on Dick.

We talk some more.

We listen some more.

We ruminate.

We take breaks and chit-chat.

We catch up.

We spend time together.

We let our guards down.

And ultimately, we work through whatever it was that caused the tussle. I would be fibbing if I said this last year was easy. Being President Elect is both a tremendous honor AND responsibility. As I like to occasionally joke, "It's always easier being the smart-aleck in the back of the room cracking jokes." Every once in a while I sit through these functions and meetings, listening . . . And I remember what I already knew, I recall what drew me to the organization: Oh yeah, these people are REALLY and I mean REALLY awesome.

They are smart.

They are considerate.

They are compassionate.

They are dedicated.

So, I think it's pretty common for the next thought after realizing, *these people are awesome and all-around wonderful human beings*, is this: **My GOD, What Have I Done?** It is one thing to imagine yourself President. It's entirely another thing to realize you are going to be the President of some-

thing so important as NCAJ. It's sort of like realizing that you'll be getting a grade in that class you thought you were auditing. Trying to figure out how to live up to a 50+ year standard set by a bunch of Super Heroes is a daunting task.

Learning how to be President has been both challenging and rewarding. BUT FOR Chris Nichols, I don't know if I would be ready right now. Chris included me. Chris educated me. Chris listened to me. Chris gently re-directed me. Chris helped me to focus. Chris told me the truth. Chris prepared me to be President. I plan on doing the same for Brad Bannon. When this whirlwind called the Presidency is over, I know we will still be friends. And for that I must say, thank you, Chris Nichols.

Think on this:

NCAJ is a voluntary association of approximately 3,000 members.

3,000 lawyer and paralegal members.

3,000 smart, independently minded members.

3,000 opinions . . . oh my.

You are not required to join NCAJ. You can get CLE for less. Mind you, I did not say better CLE, or more helpful CLE, or more informative CLE, or more practical CLE. I just said less expensive CLE.

You can also sit back as a lawyer in this state and do nothing for the community. You can criticize, condemn, and complain about the legislature and the laws, the lawmakers, the judges, the courts, and the justices. You can complain NCAJ is X or Y when it should be A or B.

I want to share with you tonight what I think is the single greatest asset we have as the North Carolina Advocates of Justice.

Here it is: **We are, in our differences and diversity, strong.**

In our differences and diversity we may bend, but do not break. In our differences and diversity we will not just survive, but excel.

I am NCAJ in everything I do . . . or should do.

So are you.

I am NCAJ.

You are NCAJ.

We are NCAJ.

In this time of change, and let's be honest, this is generational change, we must focus on who we are, our strengths, and what brought us here: **Dick Taylor**. I have a man-crush on Dick Taylor. He has been my shining star, my guiding light, my source of hope, and my inspiration. When Dick

took over as CEO, our Executive-Level Member-Lawyers were still writing all the checks and handling day-to-day affairs for the organization. Say what you will about Dick Taylor. I know I have put him through his paces, and tested his patience, as much as anyone.

But under Dick Taylor we:

- Became a professional association of attorneys;
- Grew to be the third-largest Trial Lawyers Association (TLA) in the nation; (BTW, that includes New York and California)
- Cemented ourselves as a leader in Political Lobbying, Continuing Legal Education and Social Justice;
- Grew the budget to over \$3,000,000;
- Bought a building;
- Placed over \$1,000,000 in reserves;
- Started NC CRED;
- Started a mock trial organization;
- Established the Endowment;
- Established the Educational Foundation

Dick Taylor has been very important to our beloved organization.

So in Dick's leaving next year, it's understandable that the membership might be a bit nervous. It's understandable that YOU might be a bit nervous. As your President I feel it is important to reassure you.

It is well.

We are well.

We will survive.

We will continue to grow.

We will continue to prosper.

We will continue to help people.

And why is that? **Because We Are NCAJ.**

We are, individually, flawed, imperfect beings; but, together we are amazing. And maybe you are like me back then. Maybe you are attending this Convention, sitting there like I did in 1995, completely ignorant of the universe of NCAJ around me, wondering: "Hey, these are really neat people. How is it that I like everyone so much?" I'll save you some time. **It's because of who you are. It's because of who WE are.**

We are NCAJ.

We put aside our differences.

We focus on what binds us.

And what is that?

Others. Serving others. Helping others.

Dedicating our lives to helping those whom are disadvantaged or who cannot help themselves.

In that we are **NOT** divided.

In that we stand firm.

In that we are resolute.

In that there is no dispute.

We fight big brother.

We fight the system.

We fight injustice.

We fight bullies.

In individually taking up the cause, we collectively make North Carolina a better place to live.

So, however you got here, realize this: **You are here. You belong.**

You believe in our Mission . . . or at least hopefully the part about helping people. And if you don't know our Mission or know it well enough, here it is: The North Carolina Advocates for Justice is a nonpartisan association of legal professionals dedicated to protecting people's rights through community, education, and advocacy.

Thank you to my ever-patient wife, Sammie. Thank you to my wonderful, smart daughter, Mookie. Thank you to all my family here tonight. Thank you to my law partners and staff.

I am going to do my best. I am going to make sure we endure. I will be the steady ship during heavy waves. I covet your thoughts. I covet your prayers. I covet your well wishes. I covet your patience.

And I pray that, if you don't already, you come to understand the importance of and love NCAJ as much as I do.

THIS is my beautiful, diverse house. THIS is my beautiful NCAJ life. THAT is how I got here. Thank You. ♦

**NCAJ's annual Convention was formerly held at Ocean Creek.*

Welcome New Members

**joined NCAJ after March 10, 2016*

Karen Adams
Kendra Alleyne
La'Ronda Arnold
Juan Arreola
Tanya Becena
Marcus Becton
Clifton Beio
Carolyn Bentley
Joseph Brewer
Bradley Buchanan
Antoinette Burwell
Courtenay Byrd
David Caulder
Galo Centenera
Rebecca Chappell
Cassidy Cloninger
Michael Cohen
Marty Cole
Katherine Corpening
Elsbeth Crawford
Monica DaSilva
John Davis

Richard Dingus
Karen Draper Gerber
Kathleen Eaton
Cynthia Ellis
Carol Foxx
Anne Fristoe
Melissa Garcia
Rebecca Gitlen
Paul Gordon
Inezmarie Graci
Caroline Gregory
Sara Guerra
Carolyn Guest
Hubert Hamilton
Ryan Heffner
Karina Herhusky
Clay Hodges
Tamara Huckert
Freddy Iwan
Shannon Jarvis
Patrick Keeley
Dionne Kelly

David King
Mario Krueger
Angaza Laughinghouse
Woo-Il Lee
Kenny Lee
Michael Lovejoy
Anthony Lucas
James Lucy
Jason Lunsford
Susan Lynch
Victor Macam
Courtney Mann
Lacy Mau-McDowell
Teresa McCollum
Jacob McDonald
Jordanna Mitchell
Jacob Modla
R. Todd Mosley
Kevin Murtagh
Reginald Noala
Cate O'Callahan
Dewey O'Kelley

Amy Osborne
Adam Owensby
William Parra
Alexander Paschall
William Percise
Nolan Perry
Robert Pike
Aindrea Pledger
Yesenia Polanco-Galdamez
Samuel Potter
William Price
Stephen Radford
Samuel Randall
Mary Roberson
Jessica Roman
Nathan Rubenson
Benton Sawrey
Brian Shillito
Emily Smith Peacock
Fiona Steer
Kathy Stewart
Jessica Stone

Heather Tabor
Paul Tharp
Troy Thresher
Joshua Valentine
Melody VanDyne
Anastase Vonsiatsky
Brycen Williams
Leslie Wise
Charles Woodyard
Gabriel Zeller