



## “When I Was a New Lawyer”

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### What is your background, and what inspired you to become a lawyer?

I grew up on a farm in Lascassas, Tennessee, and graduated with a degree in agricultural economics from the University of Tennessee. I worked for two years for the Tennessee Farm Bureau Federation in a publications and public relations role but knew that I wanted to pursue an advanced degree in either agricultural journalism or law. Raised on the farm, I had no regular encounters with lawyers other than Perry Mason. However, at UT, my fraternity advisor was a successful Knoxville lawyer who taught me about the profession, encouraged me to attend law school, and helped me get my first clerking job.

### Where did you go to law school, and what did you do after that?

I graduated from the University of Tennessee College of Law in 1980. My first job was as a law clerk for the Honorable Lewis H. Conner Jr. on the Tennessee Court of Appeals. The decision to work for Judge Conner was one of the most beneficial ones I ever made.

### Do you have any young lawyer experiences that particularly stand out in your memory? If so, what have you learned from them/how have they helped you to become so successful?

Working for Judge Conner, I honed my writing and analytical skills and learned about professionalism and the value of legal organization involvement. He taught me that giving back to the profession and making it stronger is as important as being a good practitioner. He was a real mentor, and I have made few significant professional decisions without consulting him first.

### Whom do you most admire?

I admire a legion of folks. I can't name just one. Here are a few: Judge Conner, for reasons I've explained. My wife, Laura, for sticking with me for 26 years and for being my soul mate and companion. My kids, for their accomplishments and the lessons I learn from them daily. Charlie Lewis, for establishing a firm that strives for excellence but never loses sight of the value of personal and professional development. Dick Krieg and Debbie Stevens, two of my partners, for their leadership, their confidence in me, and for giving me opportunities I wouldn't have had anywhere else. Howard Vogel, for his professional leadership in the state and nation and for the opportunities he created for countless Tennessee lawyers.

### What is your greatest source of professional pride?

First, I am grateful to be a lawyer. With Judge Conner's help, in the early 1980s I started a young lawyer organization for the Nashville Bar Association (NBA) with about 20 members. Today, 25 years later and with hundreds of members, the organization is the public service arm and the heart and soul of the NBA. Second, I am grateful to have served as president of the Tennessee Bar Association, the state's largest professional organization, where I had a pulpit for professional issues, and I used it. We recruited pro bono volunteers like never before, and I created Leadership Law, a program to develop young and diverse lawyer leaders for the future. The program began with 30 recruits and is now in its sixth successful year. Finally, I am extremely honored and humbled to serve as the chair of TIPS.

### What got you started with ABA involvement?

Howard Vogel, then a leader in the ABA's Young Lawyers Division, encouraged me to become involved. He helped me become appointed to a YLD committee, and the rest is history.

### What was the worst professional advice you ever received?

Once I was told to not sweat a client's small problems. I soon learned that every per-

son's issue is important to them; it does not matter if it is great or small.

### What was the best professional advice you ever received?

Judge Conner advised me to think about my priorities, establish them, and stick to them. Likewise, his advice to become involved in the profession has proven invaluable.

### What personality trait has served you best over the years?

I can identify three traits that have served me well: persistence, a positive attitude, and decisiveness.

### What challenges you the most?

Getting everything done that I want to accomplish; there are just too many challenging and interesting opportunities out there.

### What is the one thing that you cannot stand (regarding the law/lawyers)?

I am challenged by lawyers, and people in general, who cannot make decisions. Likewise, I am bothered by lawyers who are rude and disrespectful.

### What is your favorite type of legal work?

I enjoy complex problems. I like to examine all the facts and come up with a creative and effective path to resolution. Also, I enjoy my mediation practice and settlement negotiations.

### Tell us how TortSource came about.

Several years ago, the TIPS Council, under the leadership of Kip Reader and others, determined that the Section needed a third publication to reach members in the months that *The Brief* and the *Journal* were not sent. I was asked to chair the initial creative effort to launch a new quarterly publication, in which Nita Luis and Anne Spencer, a representative of ABA Press (now ABA Publishing), also participated. Within a few months, we developed the idea for a tabloid-size publication with a casual, yet informative, format. It would be an easy-to-read publication featuring articles about substantive issues and Section activities. We even held a contest to determine the name, and *TortSource* was selected. The winner received a week at a beach condo (contributed by a Council member). Next, we went to work on the design. We wanted colorful and snappy (some would say edgy) graphics. The inaugural issue of *TortSource* was published in the fall of 1998. It was well received and has continued to be a staple in the TIPS publications arsenal since that time. The newsletter's development was a great experience for the three of us, and it appears the publication has served the Section well over the years.

### What would you most like to accomplish as TIPS chair?

I want to continue to develop young lawyers for the future of the Section and the profession. I will work to ensure that TIPS maintains its position as the profession's leader on tort trial and insurance-related issues. We will continue to lobby the ABA and Congress about issues important to our members. In addition, I want to establish a group that will focus on ways for past leaders to remain active in the Section. And, we will accomplish these goals while having a good time.

### What themes will you focus on for 2009–2010?

Diversity, leadership development, maintenance of TIPS as the profession's leader on tort trial and insurance issues, and recognition of the contributions that former leaders have made to the Section.

### What can the ABA do to be a good home to young lawyers?

Simply, the ABA must be relevant to young lawyers, and all lawyers for that matter. We must continue to offer challenging and innovative programs and cutting-edge opportunities for involvement. ♦



John R. Tarpley then and now.



### John Tarpley's Advice for New Lawyers:

- Find out what you want to do and chart a course to do it.
- Find a mentor.
- You cannot be everything to everybody.
- Think strategically about your work and your life.
- Become a part of something that is bigger than you are.
- Be positive and courteous. ♦