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President's Column

Toni M. Higginbotham

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President's Column

Toni M. Higginbotham

As a newly elected trial judge in the state of Louisiana in 1996, one of the most important decisions I made was joining the American Judges Association, the Voice of the Judiciary®—the premier organization of judges, for judges. That marked the beginning of my commitment to becoming the best judge I could be, and to working to make our judiciary the finest in the world.

Having just celebrated Thanksgiving with my family, I feel compelled to begin my year as president of the American Judges Association by pointing out all the thank-yous I have for our organization.

My first thank-you is to the founders of the AJA and all my predecessors and fellow judges who had the vision of how valuable such an organization would be to each of us. Since 1959, AJA judges have been working to make this the important organization it is today. What makes the AJA so special is that it provides all of us the opportunity to exchange ideas with colleagues from jurisdictions in 50 states and Canada.

I am thankful to everyone for the very successful annual conference held in New Orleans in October in partnership with the Louisiana Judicial College. The theme was innovative judging, and the conference was definitely innovative. Educational offerings included a review of the recent decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court, as well as sessions on ethics in the Internet age, new approaches to procedural fairness, components of veterans treatment courts, pro se protective-order proceedings, child-custody issues, domestic violence, multijurisdictional judging, courts and media, using technology, and drugged driving. Thank you to everyone who made the conference such a success.

The Red Mass at historic St. Louis Cathedral in the French Quarter was thought-provoking for everyone, reminding us how important our work in the judiciary is to our country. The centuries-old tradition celebrating the beginning of the judicial year was attended by judges, lawyers, officials, and citizens of all faiths for the purpose of invoking God's blessing and guidance in the administration of justice.

A special thank-you goes to the host city and state judges who organized special events for our members, their families, and guests. These events were hosted by the Louisiana Supreme Court, Conference of Court of Appeal Judges, District Judges Association, City Judges Association, Judicial College, State Bar Association, and Fourth and Fifth Circuit Judges. The entertainment, food, and hospitality were fabulous.

Thanks are also in order for the American Judges Foundation and everyone who attended the fundraiser in the penthouse at the Ritz Carlton. The Stewart Juneau family graciously allowed

us to use their home. The hard work and generosity of the volunteers enable us to fund our law-school essay contest and other special projects. The American Judges Foundation is moving forward in establishing an endowment fund to support the future education of judges from North America.

The National Center for State Courts staff who support the AJA, especially Shelley Rockwell and Barry Forrest, make it possible for all of us to keep our organization running smoothly. Thank you for your dedication.

Although you can see we have much to be thankful for, to keep our organization viable, we still have work to do to make it even better. Some of our goals are:

1. Enhancing participation and services to AJA members, and maintaining and increasing our membership.
2. Developing a network with other judicial and legal institutions to create a first-class educational program.
3. Providing more electronic educational forums for AJA members and producing distance-learning sessions.
4. Partnering with other organizations to enhance collaborative opportunities.
5. Encouraging members to routinely produce white papers addressing specific issues facing judges.
6. Being the leading Voice of the Judiciary® by having greater visibility on judicial issues, having a dialogue with the media, and developing responses to attacks on judges, courts, and judicial systems.



As you can see, our work must be ongoing to maintain our mission as the Voice of the Judiciary®. On the immediate horizon are further presentations of the new AJA white paper, *Minding the Court*, by Judge Kevin Burke, Judge Steve Leben, and Pamela Casey, Ph.D.—a paper prepared with support from the State Justice Institute. We are also finalizing the domestic-violence distance-learning project that will be free to all judges on the AJA website. And the executive committee is hard at work on the 2013 midyear and fall conferences.

All judges need the American Judges Association, and the AJA needs all you judges! We all have strengths—whether it is presenting white papers, teaching, serving on the AJA Board of Governors, developing specialized training, writing for our publications, attending conferences, or simply being a dues-paying member.

Since we all have very demanding judicial jobs, the key to maintaining and improving our organization is to get some participation and work from each of our members. Is anyone willing? If so, what are you willing to do? Please be in touch.