



John Henry Lewin Jr. '65  
Cardin Pro Bono Service Award



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PATRICIA YOUNG

In winter 1998, three homicide defendants were released without trial.

Plagued by overcrowded courts and an antiquated docket-entry system, the three defendants who walked served as a wake-up call for reform of the Baltimore City court system.

An ad-hoc committee comprising various heads of agencies was formed. Unfortunately, little was accomplished. This was a systemic problem, and a number of committee members and an editorial in the *Baltimore Sun* called for a third-party mediator.

Enter John Henry Lewin Jr., partner at Venable, Baetjer & Howard. As a business trial lawyer with the firm since 1968 and a staunch believer in public service, Lewin was called in March 1999 to a one-year volunteer commitment as mediator for the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC). It is this intense commitment that made the School of Law take note and honor him with the 2001 Benjamin L. Cardin Pro Bono Service Award.

“John exhibited great dedication to the public good when he undertook the work as a full-time activity,” notes John Isbister a partner at Tydings & Rosenberg who nominated Lewin for the award. He demonstrated his concern for the community when he threw himself into a project—criminal justice—that did not directly concern his practice as a civil litigator.”

His role with the CJCC started as expected. His strategy was basic: interview the council members and identify major issues. A mediator was necessary because, “though everyone I’ve worked with is an exceptional public servant, there was no focal point, no time to plan. I’ve had fun doing long-range planning,” explains Lewin.

Council members, including judges, the secretary of public safety and correction, the police commissioner, the mayor, the attorney general, the lieutenant governor,

and designees from the state’s attorneys and public defenders offices all agreed on one issue: insufficient excuses were given for trials to be discontinued.

“Every time I turned a leaf there was a problem,” attests Lewin. From communication to discovery to inadequate staffing, Lewin and the CJCC set out tackling the issues one by one. They hired two judges, instead of one, to handle discovery court, established a pilot program with the state’s attorneys office to streamline cases brought before the court, and replaced a manual system of docket entry with information-age equipment.

Two years into his one-year commitment, Lewin remains on the job. He will witness what some of this new technology will do, no doubt, as the fiber optic cables are laid and connected. Before Lewin and the CJCC, a police officer hand-wrote an offense report, which was then typed, filed and sent to the prosecutor. Now, the officer will enter the report online from a mobile unit with ready access to the prosecutor and the public defender.

Another idea of the CJCC’s is early disposition court, or in layman’s terms as Lewin describes, “getting the chaff out of the system so we can concentrate on the wheat.” A category of misdemeanors typically fall into the rut of postponement, trial or dismissal. In early disposition court, the goal is to dispose of 50 percent of these cases within 24 hours of arrest. Instead of going through the court system, the defendant is assigned to community service or a treatment program.

“This will take some time,” speculates Lewin. “The criminal knows of the likelihood of his case being postponed. We need to change the course of the river by offering incentives to accepting plea offers. It will take time for defendants to get word back to the streets.” With a commitment from the mayor’s office—400 community service

positions and drug rehab—and the information technology soon to be in place—upon arrest, officers will share, online, details of the arrest, criminal record, plea offers, and data on rearrest. The early disposition court may be well on its way to meeting its goal.

Part of Lewin’s energy and ideas stem from, in theory, the perfect scenario. Perhaps this is why his vision is so accurate. He operates from a personal conviction of giving back. “[Public service] is the kind of thing that lawyers as professionals need to do. I took on a long-term project and applied what I’ve learned as a lawyer to the legal system.”

Will it work? Who knows? “At least we are no longer in the inertia stage...we’ve got the ball rolling,” states Lewin.

Born and raised in Baltimore, Lewin jokes about his longevity with Venable, Baetjer & Howard, citing a prior stint as a prosecutor in the state’s attorneys office as his only digression. He is married to the same woman he wed the year he joined the firm, jokingly placing the two events in parallel light. Their two children, he notes, are promising young professionals.

Ranking high among Lewin’s achievements, he notes, “I am honored to be selected as a fellow of the American College of Trial Layers.” He is a member of the American Law Institute, the Bar Association of Baltimore City, the Maryland State Bar Association and the American Bar Association. For the past six or seven years, he has been listed in *The Best Lawyers in America* for business litigation.

“I have litigated cases against John and have seen firsthand his exceptional skills in civil litigation,” says Isbister. “It is wonderful when talent of this caliber is brought to bear on a larger community issue.”