



# Return to Civility

*How the American Inns of Court Foundation Is Promoting Professionalism and Ethics Through Mentoring*

BY JUSTICE DONALD LEMONS

**AS PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN INNS OF COURT FOUNDATION, I CONSIDER IT AN HONOR TO ADDRESS THE LAWYERS OF TEXAS ABOUT THE INNS OF COURT MOVEMENT AND ITS PLACE IN THE NATIONWIDE EMPHASIS ON MENTORING.** The State Bar of Texas, with its *Transition to Practice* mentoring program, and the 18 Inns of Court thriving in Texas are integral parts of that movement. As a general proposition, the American Inns of Court Foundation and the more than 360 Inns nationwide are dedicated to the honorable goal of recovering civility in the legal profession—a goal much more likely to be achieved when the values and practices that serve this end are demonstrated personally by other members of the profession. Nothing promotes this objective better than organized, focused, and committed mentoring programs.

The American Inns of Court offers a fully developed and tested mentoring program. Designed for its local Inns, the program materials offer guidance and assistance in pairing mentors and protégés, which can be adapted for use by law schools, law firms, bar associations, judicial chambers, corporate lawyers, public lawyers—any group

of lawyers dedicated to mentoring in the interests of civility and professionalism in the law. The program includes suggested formats for mentoring sessions, topics to discuss, and written materials to guide the discussion, as well as suggested goals and methods of measurement. The written step-by-step model for constructing the mentoring program can be downloaded from the American Inns of Court website, [home.innsofcourt.org/for-members/future-members/mentoring.aspx](http://home.innsofcourt.org/for-members/future-members/mentoring.aspx).

The concept for the American Inns of Court arose from Warren Burger's expressed concern when he was Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court over what he characterized as diminishing standards of work product and the decline of civility at the American bar. He was particularly impressed with English barristers who appeared to maintain high-quality legal work while conducting themselves with remarkable professionalism. Chief Justice Burger challenged a number of American judges and lawyers to replicate the English experience in America. From their efforts came the American Inns of Court.

Specifically, the American Inns of Court is devoted to promotion of professionalism, civility, ethics, and excel-



lent legal skills at the American bench and bar. From the creation of the first American Inn of Court in Utah in 1980, lawyers, judges, academics, and students nationwide have been meeting on a monthly basis in a collegial setting in their local Inn of Court for continuing education and mentoring. Today, more than 29,000 members participate in more than 360 chartered American Inns of Court. Since the founding of the American Inns of Court, more than 100,000 members have contributed to, and benefited from, involvement in this national movement.

Looking for a new way to help lawyers and judges rise to higher levels of excellence, professionalism, and ethical awareness, the American Inns of Court adopted the traditional English model of legal apprenticeship and modified it to fit the particular needs of the American legal system. American Inns of Court help lawyers become more effective advocates and counselors with a keener ethical awareness. Members learn side by side with other members who are among the

most experienced judges and attorneys in their communities. Mentoring is the foundation of an Inn's existence.

An American Inn of Court is not a social club, a course in continuing legal education, a lecture series, or an adjunct of a law school's academic program. While an Inn has some of each of these features, it is quite different in aim, scope, and effect. Membership is composed of the following categories: Masters of the Bench (judges, experienced lawyers, and law professors), Barristers (lawyers with some experience who do not meet the minimum requirements for Masters), Associates (entry-level lawyers), and Pupils (law students). The suggested number of active members in a local Inn is 80.

Most Inns concentrate on issues surrounding civil and criminal litigation practice and include lawyers from a number of specialties; however there are Inns that focus on a specific specialty, such as bankruptcy, intellectual property, family law, white-collar criminal practice, worker's compensation, admiralty, and appellate practice.

Educational programs and hands-on simulations provide the core of instruction. Particular "teams," including a cross section of judges, law professors, lawyers of varying degree of experience, and law students, take responsibility

for the evening program. Permeating everything that is done in a local Inn is the commitment to professionalism, civility, legal ethics, and excellent work product. Many Inns have a tradition of dining together at their monthly meetings. Some prefer a more reception-like social hour.

The dynamics of the American Inns of Court promote what we believe is the most effective method of instruction—mentoring. Unfortunately, in the fast pace of the practice of law, mentoring occurs too often by accident. However, I believe our profession has an excellent opportunity to effectively cultivate our core values and professionalism by intentional mentoring. Certainly, no one mentoring program is sufficient to make the difference desired; however with mentoring programs like the Texas *Transition to Practice* and the American Inns of Court, we can expect great improvement in our profession. **TBJ**



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