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*State Bar of Georgia Young Lawyers Division*

# THE YLD REVIEW

Volume 67, Issue 2, January 2026

*Working for the Profession and the Public*



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## From the President

## Benefits of YLD Leadership



**Veronica Rogusky Cox**

## Why Become a Leader in the YLD?

**For many young lawyers, the demands** of building a practice, managing clients and finding balance can make professional engagement feel like just another item on a long to-do list. Yet, involvement in the Young Lawyers Division (YLD) offers something deeper: an opportunity to grow as a leader, connect with peers and contribute meaningfully to the profession. Beyond enhancing your résumé, YLD leadership opens doors to personal growth, professional development and lifelong relationships that shape not only your career but also the future of the legal community.

## Leadership Academy

This year we celebrate a major milestone for the YLD, the 20th anniversary of Leadership Academy. Since its founding in 2006, the YLD Leadership Academy has served as a training ground for some of Georgia's finest legal leaders.

With approximately 900 alumni, the program has cultivated generations of lawyers who are not only dedicated to excellence in their practice but also to service within the State Bar of Georgia and the legal community. Many of the Bar's most active and influential members trace their roots to Leadership Academy. Alumni have gone on to become judges, Bar leaders, community advocates and mentors.

Celebrating two decades of Leadership Academy means celebrating a legacy of investment in the future of our profession

and a commitment to developing thoughtful, engaged and service-oriented lawyers who understand that leadership in the law extends far beyond the courtroom.

## Networking, Connection and Community

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of involvement in the YLD is the opportunity for connection. Beyond leadership training, the YLD provides one of the best opportunities to build genuine relationships within the legal community. The legal profession can be demanding, and at times, isolating. Through YLD programs, you'll find a network of peers who understand those challenges and share your commitment to professional growth and service.

Many YLD members have met lifelong friends, business partners, mentors, referral sources, future employers and even spouses through YLD events and Leadership Academy. These connections make the practice of law more rewarding and sustainable. In short, YLD involvement helps you surround yourself with like-minded professionals and helps you stay grounded, stay engaged and—quite simply—stay sane.

## A Pathway to Leadership

For many, YLD service marks the beginning of a larger journey of professional and Bar leadership. It often starts modestly with committee participation, event planning or volunteering, but those early steps frequently lead to greater roles.

*The YLD Review seeks to provide a forum for the discussion of subjects pertaining to the regulation of the legal profession and improving the quality of legal services, as well as other matters of general interest to Georgia lawyers. The statements, views and the opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of State Bar of Georgia, its officers, Board of Governors, sections, committees or staff.*

From committee chair to YLD director and even to officer positions within the YLD and the State Bar's Executive Committee, leadership opportunities abound. A vast majority of YLD former presidents are graduates of the Leadership Academy. YLD leaders have gone on to hold leadership roles across Georgia's local bar associations, civic organizations and the judiciary. The YLD continues to be a cornerstone for cultivating the next generation of leaders in our state.

### Other Perks

Of course, YLD leadership isn't all work and no play. Participation comes with a few lighter perks, too, like great YLD swag, CLEs, quarterly events and access to some of the most enjoyable social and professional events of the year.

The camaraderie and sense of belonging that come from those moments often serve as the glue that keeps members connected long after their official YLD years have ended.

### Final Thoughts

The YLD remains a place where young lawyers can grow, lead and find their place within Georgia's vibrant legal community. So, if you're asking yourself whether it's worth it to get involved, the answer is simple: yes.

The YLD is more than a stepping stone; it is a community, a support system and a launching pad for those who want to make a meaningful impact on the profession. *YLD*

*Veronica Rogusky Cox is senior associate general counsel at OpenText.*



## JOIN A YLD COMMITTEE

The YLD has 30 committees working to support our motto of service to the community and profession. Each committee works diligently to provide substantive programming in their respective focus areas.

From the Editors

## Meet the Editors



**T. Alec Chappell**

**Thanks to our many talented authors,** the October 2025 *YLD Review* was overflowing with content. We hope you found their articles as insightful and inspirational as we did. But, with our laser like focus on producing a quality newsletter, as YLD President Veronica Rogusky Cox helpfully reminded us, we neglected to introduce ourselves.

We remedy that now.

### Alec Chappell

Born and raised in Columbus, Georgia, I moved to Macon in 2008 to attend Mercer University, where, in 2012, I received a B.A. in political science with a minor in economics, graduating *summa cum laude*. From there, I chose to become a Double Bear, attending Mercer's Walter F. George School of Law, receiving my J.D. *summa cum laude*, and graduating first in my class in 2016.

During law school, I interned with Hon. Edgar W. Ennis Jr., of the Superior Court of Bibb County and with Hon. C. Ashley Royal of the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Georgia. After law school, Judge Royal kept me around as a clerk for one year. When that clerkship ended in 2017, I moved to Savannah to clerk for Hon. Edward J. Coleman III, of the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Southern District of Georgia. Initially, Judge Coleman hired me for a two-year term, but he quickly named me his career clerk, and I continue to serve in that role today.

Like many, I waited too long to become involved with the YLD. In 2019, I joined the Savannah YLD, edited that organization's newsletter, *The Citation*, for four years, and served as Savannah YLD president during the 2023-24 Bar year. I got involved with the State Bar's YLD in 2022 and served as a director from 2023-24. During the 2024-25 Bar year, I co-edited *The YLD Review* alongside the brilliant and diligent Siena Gaddy



**Carlos Fernández**

and Jena Emory, who together set a high standard for this newsletter. I'm thrilled to welcome Carlos on board and confident that we can uphold that standard.

### Carlos Fernandez

I was born and raised in Miami, went to Emory University for undergrad and the University of Florida for law school. Law school became a turning point because I discovered the power of involvement and relationships. The more I participated, the more I realized that real progress happens when you help others move forward too. My involvement defined the term "networking" and gave me a path to walk forward on.

I've practiced as a family attorney, prosecutor, insurance defense lawyer and now as a plaintiff's attorney. Each role taught me something different about people, responsibility and the value of showing up. I stay active in the Young Lawyers Division, Atlanta Bar Association, Georgia Hispanic Bar Association, Georgia Trial Lawyers Association and the Atlanta Gator Club. Staying engaged has opened doors in my career and led to opportunities like serving as an editor for this publication.

Now, as I step into fatherhood, my focus is on building legacy instead of chasing work. I measure success by preparation, discipline and consistency—the quiet parts that matter most. I want to be remembered as the attorney who showed up when called, who provided not just results but meaning. I hope that my career isn't defined by whether I reached the top, but about how many others came with me. *YLD*

*T. Alec Chappell is career law clerk for Hon. Edward J. Coleman III, U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Southern District of Georgia.*

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# A Call for Creativity: Why Fresh Thinking is a Professional Imperative



**John David  
Flowers**

**Being a lawyer is a privilege. We get to help people by crafting unique solutions to difficult problems.** But for some reason, “creativity” is not a word we often hear in conversations about the law. Maybe it’s because our system looks to precedent, and rote application of existing law often wins the day. Or maybe lawyers get lulled into doing things how they’ve always been done. The legal profession rightly prides itself on established standards and analytical precision, but in our rapidly changing world, creativity is not merely an advantage; *it’s a professional obligation*. It’s the defining trait that separates modern lawyers from artificial intelligence. We are not machines; we are critical thinkers. We craft innovative solutions where others see roadblocks.

Legal creativity is a necessary skill. Boiled down, legal creativity is the ability to see connections where others do not. We have all handled a case (or several) where some aspects of the facts or law are not on your side. In many such cases, the best you can do is advocate for your client but concede when necessary. There are, however, some cases where the law allows room for interpretation. The law is unsettled either because it’s new, or there’s a dearth of appellate guidance. *These cases are opportunities*. Use your creativity to draw connections and craft a compelling argument that diminishes the bad fact or distinguishes the bad law.

## Make Connections Beyond the Text

New statutes are ripe for creative legal thought. When interpreting statutes, Georgia courts “afford the statutory text its plain and ordinary meaning, view it in the context in which it appears, and read it in its most



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natural and reasonable way, as an ordinary speaker of the English language would.”<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, “we must presume that the General Assembly meant what it said and said what it meant.”<sup>2</sup> This interpretive mandate gives advocates an opportunity. Read new statutes closely. What do they actually say? Is there an honest, good faith interpretation that could help your client? Perhaps the General Assembly enacted a statute for a specific purpose, but the plain text and ordinary meaning call for a broader interpretation or application in a different context.

Consider this example. I represented a client with a wrongful death claim after a young man was killed due to the negligence of a commercial motor vehicle driver. The decedent lived with his fiancée, who was pregnant with the decedent’s only child. The decedent had never married but had a surviving parent. Under Georgia’s Wrongful Death Act, when someone is killed due to the negligence of another and dies without a spouse, the decedent’s child can pursue the wrongful death claim, but if they die without a spouse and without children, the decedent’s surviving parent(s) can pursue the claim.<sup>3</sup> Here, there were concerns that

the decedent’s surviving parent would unilaterally settle the wrongful death claim and leave the decedent’s unborn child with nothing. Time was of the essence. The decedent’s fiancée retained us to protect the interests of the decedent’s unborn child. The question was whether an unborn child shared in the legal rights that Georgia’s Wrongful Death Act confers to a “child.” Stated differently, could an unborn child have a legal right to resolve a wrongful death claim arising out of a parent’s death? It was an interesting question that required creative thinking.

Our research brought us to the Living Infants Fairness and Equality (LIFE) Act (the Act), colloquially known as Georgia’s “Heartbeat Bill.”<sup>4</sup> Most people know the Act as having criminalized abortion after a heartbeat is detectable, typically six weeks. That is accurate, but the text goes beyond that well-known provision. The General Assembly found unborn children to be “a class of living, distinct persons” with “full legal recognition[.]”<sup>5</sup> The Act made it “the policy of the State of Georgia to recognize unborn children as natural persons” and defined “[n]atural person” as “any human being including an unborn child.”<sup>6</sup> It defined

“[u]nborn child” as “a member of the species *Homo sapiens* at any stage of development who is carried in the womb.”<sup>7</sup>

The LIFE Act and the relevant caselaw<sup>8</sup> counseled that the unborn child was the lawful wrongful death claimant.<sup>9</sup> Georgia’s Wrongful Death Act allows a “child” to recover for the wrongful death of a parent,<sup>10</sup> and, under the LIFE Act, unborn children have full legal recognition as natural persons.<sup>11</sup> Of course minors can’t sue, but a parent or legal guardian can act as guardian ad litem or “next friend.” Meaning, the unborn child’s mother could pursue the claim on behalf of the unborn child. Defense counsel agreed, and that child now has meaningful financial security.

As this example illustrates, the law constantly changes, and opportunities for innovative legal thinking are always there. In this past legislative session alone, around 400 bills and resolutions cleared the General Assembly. Each could present opportunities for creative advocacy.<sup>12</sup>

## Innovate with Integrity

Some may be concerned about identifying the line between legal creativity and insincerity. Remember, legal creativity is not about evasion or obfuscation; it’s about innovating with integrity. Interpreting the law is an exercise in professional discretion. Use yours to identify the line between a novel, good faith legal interpretation that benefits your client and an intellectually dishonest argument that misconstrues the law. And don’t ever cross that line.

A great trial lawyer once told me jury trials are credibility contests; the winner is often who the jury believes is most honest. That’s also true in the practice of law generally. The best lawyers I know are those with unimpeachable credibility and a knack for creativity. They find solutions others overlook, and they pioneer with integrity. We should all strive to be like that.

Creative legal thinking is key to ensuring the best outcomes for clients in our fast-paced and ever-evolving world. It’s an area where we can all improve, and that starts with looking for the right opportunities. Identify those unique opportunities in your practice where creative advocacy can turn the tide and lean into what sets you apart. YLD

*John David Flowers is an associate at Peak Wooten McDaniel and Coldwell.*

## Endnotes

1. *Alston & Bird, LLP v. Hatcher Mgmt. Holdings, LLC*, 312 Ga. 350, 353 (2021) (citation and punctuation omitted).
2. *Deal v. Coleman*, 294 Ga. 170, 172 (2013) (citation omitted).
3. See O.C.G.A. § 51-4-2; O.C.G.A. § 19-7-1.
4. H.B. 481, Reg. Sess., 2019 Ga. Laws 711.
5. *Id.* § 2(3)-(4). A testament to the scope of the Act, the findings section expressly includes the “unalienable Rights” from the Declaration of Independence and “fundamental rights of all persons” under the Fourteenth Amendment. See *id.* § 2(1)-(2); see also Michael G. Foo, Taylor L. Lin, *Persons and Their Rights*, 36 Ga. St. U.L. Rev. 155, 169 (2019).
6. H.B. 481 §§ 2(6), 3(b).
7. *Id.* § 3(e)(2) (codified at O.C.G.A. § 1-2-1). The Act also amended O.C.G.A. § 19-7-1(c) (1) related to the right of recovery for the homicide of an unborn child.
8. *E.g., deVente v. Flora*, 300 Ga. App. 10, 10-12 (2009) (where decedent father conceived child out of wedlock and was killed before child’s birth, and child’s mother brought declaratory action on behalf of unborn child against decedent’s parents seeking declaratory judgment as to the unborn child’s status as sole wrongful death claimant, the court reasoned that “the right to bring the wrongful death action was the child’s to assert.”); *Stewart v. Bourn*, 250 Ga. App. 755, 759 (2001) (observing that “the legislative trend is to broaden representation” with respect to who can recover under a wrongful death claim).
9. Longstanding precedent supports this interpretation. See, e.g., *Morrow v. Scott*, 7

Ga. 535, 537 (1849) (“An infant *in ventre sa mere*, or in the mother’s womb, is supposed in law to be born, for many purposes. It is capable of having a legacy, or a surrender of a copyhold estate made to it. It may have a guardian assigned to it; and it is enabled to have an estate limited to its use, and to take afterwards, by such limitation, as if it were then actually born”) (quoting 1 *Bl. Com.* 130; 1 *Roper on Legacies*, 53).

10. O.C.G.A. § 51-4-2(a).
11. See H.B. 481 §§ 2(4), 3(b).
12. There are opportunities beyond statutes, too. Certain provisions of the Georgia Constitution are largely unlitigated and open to interpretation, and the Supreme Court of Georgia emphasizes interpreting the Georgia Constitution on its own terms, not merely importing federal interpretations. See Nels S.D. Peterson, *Principles of Georgia Constitutional Interpretation*, 75 Mercer L. Rev. 1-2 (2023) (“It might seem to some that the need for novel state constitutional interpretation would be a rare occurrence, and on the federal level, that’s probably right. *But the Georgia Constitution is quite different from its federal counterpart ... These differences naturally create far more interpretive opportunities*”) (emphasis added, citations omitted). See also *id.* at 52, 54 (noting that “many provisions of the Georgia Constitution that are either blank slates or are under-interpreted” and that there are “many, many Georgia constitutional questions awaiting proposed answers from thoughtful and creative litigators”) (emphasis added).



# How the Bankruptcy Code Discourages Serial Filings



**T. Alec Chappell**

**The Bankruptcy Code nowhere prohibits** successive bankruptcy filings, even serial filings. But curbing repeat filings was a major impetus behind the Bankruptcy Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act of 2005 (BAPCPA), which was supported “mostly by credit card companies, banks, and other creditor groups[.]”<sup>1</sup> In its current form, post-BAPCPA, the Code disincentivizes debtors from filing repeat bankruptcies. This article surveys the most important of those disincentives for consumer debtors in Chapter 7 and 13 cases.

## Limitations on the Automatic Stay

The moment a debtor files a petition with the bankruptcy court,<sup>2</sup> an automatic stay goes into effect, preventing creditors from taking certain actions (e.g. foreclosure, repossession, lawsuits, garnishments and evictions) against the debtor or the debtor’s property interests.<sup>3</sup> The automatic stay is limited, however, if the debtor had one or more cases in the previous year. If the debtor had one case pending in the previous year that was dismissed, then the automatic stay terminates 30 days after the debtor files a successive case.<sup>4</sup> And if the debtor had two or more cases pending in the previous year that were dismissed, then the automatic stay never goes into effect in the successive case.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, the debtor may request in the first scenario that the court extend the stay beyond 30 days, or, in the second scenario, that the court impose the stay. But to do so, the debtor must demonstrate that the successive case was filed “in good faith as to the creditors to be stayed[.]”<sup>6</sup> And in certain circumstances, the Code stipulates, the successive case is *presumed* to have been

filed not in good faith, and the debtor can rebut that presumption only through “clear and convincing evidence to the contrary[.]”<sup>7</sup>

## Eligibility to Receive a Discharge

A debtor’s goal in filing for bankruptcy is to receive a discharge. The Code provides for a discharge injunction permanently enjoining future debt collection activities by creditors as to most pre-petition debts.<sup>8</sup> A debtor who successfully completes a bankruptcy case may not, however, receive the benefits of the discharge injunction in a successive case until after a specified time has passed.

For example, if a debtor receives a discharge in a Chapter 7 case, then the debtor cannot receive another Chapter 7 discharge for eight years.<sup>9</sup> If a debtor receives a discharge in a Chapter 13 case, then she cannot receive a Chapter 7 discharge for six years, with some exceptions (e.g. if the debtor paid her creditors in full in the Chapter 13 case).<sup>10</sup> If the debtor receives a Chapter 7 discharge, then she cannot receive a Chapter 13 discharge for four years.<sup>11</sup> And if the debtor receives a Chapter 13 discharge, then she cannot receive another Chapter 13 discharge for two years.<sup>12</sup>

## Dismissal with Prejudice

Normally, dismissal of a bankruptcy case has no effect on a debtor’s ability to refile.<sup>13</sup> But the Code contains an exception: an individual debtor cannot refile for 180 days if (1) “the case was dismissed by the court for willful failure of the debtor to abide by orders of the court, or to appear before the court in proper prosecution of the case”; or (2) “the debtor requested and obtained the voluntary dismissal of the case following the filing of a request for relief from the automatic stay[.]”<sup>14</sup>

The second scenario is straightforward. As one court put it, a debtor is ineligible to refile when the following conditions are met:

(1) the debtor is an individual; (2) the debtor had a previous bankruptcy case; (3) a creditor moved for stay relief in the previous case; (4) after the creditor moved for stay relief, the debtor moved for and received a voluntary dismissal; and (5) that voluntary dismissal took place within 180 days before the successive case.<sup>15</sup>

The first scenario may look simple at first glance, but it can be difficult to apply in practice. It requires the court to find that the debtor’s failure to abide by court orders, or to prosecute the case, was “willful,” a term not defined in the Code but generally understood to mean “deliberate or intentional, rather than accidental or ... beyond the debtor’s control.”<sup>16</sup> When must the court make that finding—upon dismissing the prior case, or upon the filing of the successive case? The Code doesn’t say.<sup>17</sup> The consensus seems to be that the court may make the finding in either the prior or the successive case.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

As the Supreme Court put it pre-BAPCPA, in the context of a debtor who files a Chapter 7 case followed by a Chapter 13 case (colloquially called a “Chapter 20” case), “the evident care with which Congress fashioned these express prohibitions” demonstrates that “Congress did not intend categorically to foreclose the benefit” of successive bankruptcies.<sup>19</sup> Although that remains true, the Code provisions discussed above limit the utility of bankruptcy for repeat filers, and all consumer bankruptcy practitioners need to know them. YLD

*T. Alec Chappell is career law clerk for Hon. Edward J. Coleman III, U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Southern District of Georgia.*

## Endnotes

1. Stephen J. Spurr and Kevin M. Ball, *The Effects of a Statute (BAPCPA) Designed to Make it More Difficult for People to File*.



for Bankruptcy, 87 Am. Bankr. L.J. 27, 28 (Winter 2013). See also Lance Miller and Michelle M. Miller, *Repeat Filers Under BAPCPA: A Legal and Economic Analysis*, 2008 Ann. Surv. of Bankr. Law 20 (Sept. 2008).

2. 11 U.S.C. § 301(a).
3. 11 U.S.C. § 362(a).
4. 11 U.S.C. § 362(c)(3)(A).
5. 11 U.S.C. § 362(c)(4)(A)(i).
6. 11 U.S.C. § 362(c)(3)(B) and 4(B).
7. 11 U.S.C. § 362(c)(3)(C) and 4(D).
8. 11 U.S.C. § 524(a)(2).
9. 11 U.S.C. § 727(a)(8).
10. 11 U.S.C. § 727(a)(9).
11. 11 U.S.C. § 1328(f)(1).
12. 11 U.S.C. § 1328(f)(2).
13. 11 U.S.C. § 349(a) (“[N]or does the dismissal of a case under this title prejudice the debtor with regard to the filing of a subsequent petition under this title, except as provided in section 109(g) of this title.”).
14. 11 U.S.C. § 109(g). Unlike the previous Code sections discussed in this article, which were part of BAPCPA, § 109(g) was enacted in 1984. See *In re Bryant*, 649 B.R. 342, 349 (Bankr. S.D. Ga. 2023) (Coleman, C.J.).
15. *In re Gill*, 584 B.R. 63, 66 (Bankr. W.D. Okla. 2018).
16. *In re Wen Hua Xu*, 386 B.R. 451, 455 (Bankr. S.D.N.Y. 2008).
17. *Id.*
18. *Dos Anjos v. Bank of America, N.A. (In re Dos Anjos)*, 482 B.R. 697, 703 (Bankr. D. Mass. 2012).
19. *Johnson v. Home State Bank*, 501 U.S. 78, 87 (1991).

## Officers’ Block

# What’s a “small but mighty” life hack that makes your workday smoother?



**VERONICA ROGUSKY COX** | YLD President

Making a daily checklist, including small wins to boost my motivation.



**VIRGINIA C. JOSEY** | YLD President-Elect

I automate whatever I can without sacrificing the quality and personality of my work product. For example, I utilize a transcription software that creates a to-do list from my recorded meetings.



**KINDALL BROWNING-RICKLE** | YLD Treasurer

Dry shampoo.



**CALEB RATLIFF** | YLD Secretary

For me, it is clearing my desk of clutter so I can focus better on the tasks I need to complete for that day.



**KENNETH MITCHELL JR.** | YLD Immediate Past President

Scheduled emails or delayed emails make my workday smoother.



**T. ALEC CHAPPELL** | YLD Newsletter Co-Editor

I mentally divide emails into tiers of importance and, perhaps counterintuitively, address them from lowest to highest priority. First, I’ll start by deleting all spam. Second, I’ll skim my daily news updates. Third, I’ll address emails from professional organizations. Fourth and finally, once I’ve cleared out the clutter, I’ll deal with actual work emails.



**CARLOS FERNÁNDEZ** | YLD Newsletter Co-Editor

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Young Lawyers Division  
State Bar of Georgia

# The Remote Control Theory of Modern Lawyering



**Carlos  
Fernández**

**Cars were better before infotainment** systems. You sat down, turned a key and drove. That was it. No glowing screens. No pop-up warnings. No distractions to take your eyes off the road. Now every vehicle insists on pairing with a phone, updating a system or scolding you until you “accept” the liability terms before you even move. We call that progress, but I am not so sure. Were we better off before? Does every innovation deserve applause and widespread application? Maybe some innovations should have been an attempt rather than the new standard.

Not every innovation deserves applause. Sometimes, regression is not stubbornness; it is clarity. I have learned that the same principle applies to law practice. The old school tools are often still very useful if you learn how to use them in our modern world.

## I Still Send Faxes

I guess in an article about old school technology I should address faxes by their government name: facsimiles. It is safe to say I get more responses from facsimiles than emails. Why? Because facsimiles get away from inboxes and into people’s eyes. Emails vanish in the fog of chains and accidental “mark as read” clicks. A facsimile, however, demands attention. It lands in a separate folder or even a different application entirely. It interrupts the receiver’s routine in a good way. It says, “This is deliberate. This matters. Answer me.” A facsimile carries intention, like a signature. And in a profession crowded with notifications, intention stands out.

## Go See ’Em Sweat

Zoom depositions may be efficient, but they flatten people and, in turn, your case.



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You lose everything that gives testimony its pulse. When I depose someone in person, I learn who they are. I can hold silence until the truth feels heavy enough the deponent fills the air. I can watch posture shift and words stumble. You cannot do that through pixels. The room carries a charge, a tension. Eye contact holds longer; pauses land heavier; the truth feels closer. These moments help us read between the lines to value our cases and dictate the path forward.

## One Call

Email rewards performance. It turns lawyers into warriors, essayists and actuaries. Sometimes, the tone becomes adversarial and every sentence is crafted for the record rather than resolution. But a phone call? It brings people back to earth.

For Uniform Superior Court Rule 6.4(b) communications, I prefer the phone. Voices reveal hesitation, empathy, reason. You cut through the posturing and reach the human part of the disagreement. Phone calls also disarm attorneys. Without the safety of a keyboard, lawyers often put down their swords and start listening again. A five-minute call resolves what five days of emails cannot.

## The Remote Problem

Every gadget now comes with a remote control. Air purifiers, fans, lamps, even candles. Now, we are the caretaker of a paper-thin remote, powered by a coin-sized battery that requires a screwdriver to replace. Same thing at stores. No one takes cash; we all need to scan a code, create an account, upload our credit card information, etc.

What happened to the on-off switch? What happened to the dollar bill?<sup>1</sup>

We call this advancement. I call it a burden. The law is starting to feel the same way. We have more platforms, apps and systems than ever before, yet clarity feels harder to find.

Maybe the best lawyers of tomorrow will be the ones who remember how to turn things off. To look a witness in the eye. To pick up the phone. To send a fax that cannot be swiped away.

Progress is not adding more buttons. It is remembering which ones to press—and when to stop pressing them. YLD

*Carlos Fernández is a lawyer at Kenneth S. Nugent PC in Duluth.*

## Endnote

1. The object, not the economy.



# Pay It Forward Through High School Mock Trial



**Kelsie J.  
Mattox**

**The end of summer means the beginning** of a new school year. The sights and sounds of school buses on the roads, along with flashing school zone lights, signal that class is back in session. Those are just a few clues that another mock trial season at my alma mater, Alpharetta High School (AHS), is about to begin.

A new school year brings excitement, new teammates, and fresh individual and team goals. As the air cools and the leaves begin to fall, we know the release of the new Georgia High School Mock Trial (HSMT) case problem is near. The countdown begins for the mid-October case release—a much-anticipated moment each season.

This year, my team and I eagerly awaited the release of a criminal case, which we correctly predicted would involve a murder. As a career prosecutor, I always enjoy the criminal case seasons. Fortunately, the program alternates each year between civil and criminal cases, ensuring variety and balance. HSMT thrives on the commitment of talented, ambitious and service-minded attorneys who dedicate their time to advancing the program and mentoring students.

The 2025–26 season marks my fourth year as attorney coach for AHS. As a former intercollegiate softball student-athlete, I am naturally competitive and do not like to lose—a trait shared by many athletes and lawyers alike. Although my team has not yet reached the State Championship level, our goal remains to achieve as much success as possible each season while inspiring and educating the next generation.

My role as attorney coach is not only about giving back but also about honoring the community that helped me succeed. HSMT often serves as a student's first formal exposure to the legal profession. While many develop an interest in law through

media or literature, few have hands-on experience until they join a mock trial team. For many, that experience sparks a lasting desire to pursue a career in law.

My journey to becoming the attorney coach at AHS began in the fall of 2022, shortly after I was appointed city solicitor of Alpharetta and Milton. This appointment gave me the opportunity to practice law in my hometown for the first time in my career. The proximity of my job to the high school made it easier to commit to coaching, and the familiarity with the school, former teachers and staff made the transition seamless.

At that time, AHS's mock trial team was being revived by a few dedicated seniors. I discovered this when reading the State Bar of Georgia's Enews update that August, which listed AHS as one of several schools still seeking an attorney coach. I reached out to HSMT Director Rich Harris, who connected me with a determined senior student committed to "getting the team started."

Initially, I wasn't sure what "getting the team started" meant. I hoped it simply referred to restarting after a hiatus or beginning a new season with new coaches. However, during my first call with that student, I quickly realized we were truly starting from scratch. However, during my first call with that student, I quickly realized we were truly starting from scratch. We were moving forward without established resources, prior members or experienced coaches.

I will never forget that first conversation with the student. The student was one of the most polite, professional and passionate high schoolers I had ever met. Her dedication reassured me that this endeavor was worth every challenge ahead. She went on to serve as co-captain of our inaugural 2022–23 team—what I now fondly call "Year 1." That first team of nine competitors (a full roster is 12) advanced from Regionals to Districts in our debut season. She even won an Outstanding Attorney award at Regionals, with three other students also earning honors.

HSMT Director Harris has said of the program, "HSMT is hands down the best academic extracurricular for high school students. The students are introduced to the legal profession and gain valuable insight into how the judicial system works in practice. They also develop transferable life skills like critical thinking, teamwork, public speaking and self-confidence." I could not agree more.

I encourage all young lawyers to get involved in HSMT to support the next generation of lawyers. Judging is fun, exciting and at times mind-blowing, as you watch the incredibly talented students and teams in action.

You can earn one or two hours of CLE credit—and even more if you coach a team. Mark your calendars for competitions across the state: Regional competitions will take place Jan. 29–Feb. 1 and Feb. 6–7; District competitions will follow on Feb. 21–22 and Feb. 28; and the State Finals will be held in Lawrenceville, on March 13–15. This year's National Championship will be in Des Moines, Iowa, on May 7–9.

Georgia's HSMT is one of—if not the—best programs in the country, with the statistics to prove it. We have won four National Championships and achieved 16 top-five finishes, including most recently in 2025. More than 130 schools currently compete, and is expected to grow to 200 within the next five years. The need for attorneys willing to volunteer even a few hours of their time for this amazing program is critical."

As Court of Appeals Judge Stephen Dillard once said, HSMT truly is "one of the best things we do as a State Bar." The program has given me more than I could have imagined—the sense of accomplishment in the eyes of students and their proud parents at the end of each season never gets old. It is one of the many reasons I keep coming back each year.

Your time and service to HSMT will make a lasting difference—and the next generation will initially thank you with

► SEE HSMT, PAGE 14

## Judicial Spotlight

# Chief Judge Sheryl B. Jolly



**Sarah-Elizabeth  
Strickland**

In March 2024, I had the privilege of joining Chief Judge Sheryl B. Jolly of the Columbia Judicial Circuit as her staff attorney. I previously served as an assistant district attorney on her trial team in the Augusta Judicial Circuit in 2021, and I was thrilled to expand my legal experience by joining her chambers.

Working alongside Judge Jolly has deepened my understanding of domestic relations cases and, more importantly, allowed me to witness her unwavering commitment to professionalism in the legal community. Judge Jolly is a graduate of Mercer University's Walter F. George School of Law. She began her career in 1986 as an assistant district attorney in the Augusta Judicial Circuit, later joining the Richmond County Solicitor General's Office in 1989 as an assistant solicitor. In 1994, she was appointed chief assistant solicitor general and, two years later, was elected solicitor-general, serving two terms.

In 2004, she became the first woman elected as a Superior Court judge in the Augusta Judicial Circuit, which then included Richmond, Columbia and Burke counties. When the circuit was divided in 2021, she became the presiding judge of the newly formed Columbia Judicial Circuit. Following the retirement of Judge James G. Blanchard Jr., she assumed the role of chief judge in January 2024, where she continues to serve today.

Professionalism, though sometimes difficult to define, reflects how attorneys and judges conduct themselves both inside and outside the courtroom. It develops through observation, experience, and, above all, respect—for colleagues, clients and the court. Professionalism is reflected in every interaction, whether in person, by email or before a judge. Drawing on her extensive judicial experience, Judge Jolly offers several guiding principles for young lawyers:



Chief Judge Sheryl B. Jolly

- **Recognize personal bias.** Be mindful of how your opinions or relationships can influence your perspective on a case.
- **Choose your battles wisely.** Argue with purpose, not simply to “win.”
- **Understand your client's true needs.** Effective advocacy begins with understanding goals so you can communicate, mediate and litigate effectively.
- **Consider every viewpoint.** Seeing the case from the other side helps you assess strengths and weaknesses objectively.
- **Treat opposing counsel with respect.** Your counterpart is not your enemy. Open communication leads to more productive outcomes.
- **Communicate clearly.** Clarity benefits your client, opposing counsel and the court.
- **Educate the court.** Provide clear and relevant background to help the court fully understand your case. Repetition is unnecessary.
- **Seek justice beyond the courtroom.** Resolution doesn't always require trial; meaningful mediation or plea agreements often achieve justice.
- **In family law, empathy matters.** As Judge Jolly reminds parties, “You must love your children more than you hate your spouse.”
- **Acknowledge the gray areas.** In domestic cases, lines are often blurred—there's rarely a perfect parent or simple answer.
- **Maintain client control.** Courtrooms aren't television shows, even in an age of Zoom and recorded proceedings. The world is watching.

## NEW FEATURE

### Split Decisions

## Law firms should prioritize brand-building as much as litigation results.

*Split Decisions puts lawyers on the record—no fence-sitting allowed. We ask a big question, and they respond with strongly disagree, disagree, agree or strongly agree (plus a little argument to make their case).*



When asked what she finds most rewarding about her role, Judge Jolly smiled and said her greatest joy comes from the people whose lives she's touched. Many have returned to tell her, "You may not remember me, but you changed my life by sending me to rehab instead of prison," or, "You may not remember me, but look at this picture of my son—he's thriving."

She also shared a story about a little boy at the center of a heated custody dispute. As she spoke, she opened her desk drawer and pulled out a small drawing that read, "Keep juggling." [sic] She has kept it for years as a reminder of why she does what she does.

No matter where we are in our careers, Judge Jolly's example reminds us to stay true to our oaths as attorneys—to judge fairly, seek justice and serve with honor. **YLD**

*Sarah-Elizabeth Strickland is staff attorney to Chief Judge Sheryl B. Jolly in the Columbia Judicial Circuit.*



#### SIMRAN MODI

I agree that law firms should prioritize brand-building alongside litigation results. A strong brand enhances client trust and differentiates the firm in a competitive market. For example, a firm known for its expertise in products liability should cultivate thought leadership through publications, webinars and consistent messaging. While litigation success builds credibility, branding ensures long-term growth, visibility and client retention—essential for sustained success in the legal profession.



#### MISSY TORGERSON

While building a brand is important, it should be secondary to ensuring that clients are receiving the utmost care and consideration when it comes to legal strategy. There is no point in having a brand if the results are not there to back it up.



#### KEITH COLLINS

While I don't work in a law firm, I imagine there are more important priorities than brand-building or even litigation results. The two often go hand in hand, but when overemphasized, they can come across as self-serving. Neither necessarily reflects a firm's actual contribution to the legal profession.



#### BRANDON ROSENSTEIN

When it comes to brand-building and litigation results, I would respond "neutral." Case outcomes and advertising are two contributing factors to a successful firm, and brand as a whole. A heavy influence on advertising, while sacrificing high quality legal work, may bring in more clients initially, but a volume-practice with lesser recovery or outcomes for clients does not serve the client, or the attorney for that matter, well. On the other hand, merely relying on the outcome of litigation without any focus on brand building will make it more difficult to scale a practice. I would say "neutral" to establish for lawyers that both are pieces of building a successful practice and brand.



## Member Spotlight | Northern District

Each quarter, The YLD Review highlights three of the Young Lawyers Division's most impactful members—one from each federal judicial district. Those featured in our Member Spotlight serve both the YLD and their local communities, excel in their practice and maintain the highest level of professionalism.

# Sarah R. Trahan

### *Tell us about yourself.*

I grew up in Alabaster, Alabama, a small suburban city outside of Birmingham. During my four-year stint of high school, I sat on the sidelines every Friday night in the marching band, where the football team won at most two to three games over those four years ... since then they've become state champions. I try not to take it personally. When it was time for college, I moved an hour down the road to attend the University of Alabama for my undergraduate degree, majoring in advertising. From middle school through college, I was heavily involved in music programs, playing the oboe and English horn in different ensembles.

I then continued my schooling at the University of Alabama School of Law and earned my J.D. Law school afforded me the opportunity to participate in several clinics, where I got my first taste of interacting directly with clients and advising them. Following law school, I took a leap and moved to Atlanta with my husband, with no job secured, just knowing that I wanted to live somewhere more diverse and with more opportunity. That move paid off when I passed the Bar and secured a job at a well-known firm in Gainesville. I've called Georgia home for seven years now, and live in Buford with my husband, daughter, two dogs and one very destructive cat (oddly more destructive than my toddler).

### *What is your practice area?*

For the past seven years, I have exclusively practiced family law, which has taught me more about the practice of law, contracting and emotional intelligence than I would have ever anticipated. I would encourage any young attorney looking to gain first-hand experience in a variety of practice areas and soft skills to give family law a shot. Family law practitioners must become experts on every aspect of their client's lives, have a working knowledge in a variety of practice areas, and be fierce litigators. If a client owns a business, you must become an

expert in that business area. If a client owns family lands that have been passed down for generations, then you become an expert on tracing title. If an opposing party files for bankruptcy, then you dive in feet first into that realm and attend creditor meetings and request relief for your client who needs financial support. There is nothing like drafting contracts, knowing that you will likely be the one to argue their applicability a few years down the road when one of the parties inevitably violates them. There is no limit to the knowledge you can gain in family law if you have the fortitude to walk with families through crisis.

After seven years of invaluable experience in family law, I'm excited to let *The YLD Review* be among the first to know that I think everything I've learned has pointed me to a new niche practice area. I started as corporate counsel on the litigation team at LexisNexis Risk Solutions in November 2025.

### *What is your involvement with the YLD?*

My introduction to the YLD came through the 2024 YLD Leadership Academy—a truly invaluable experience that I recommend to all young lawyers. The YLD Leadership Academy gives you the opportunity to get to know judges and influential leaders across the state, but even more importantly, gives you a cohort of fellow young attorneys to call friends and colleagues. While being involved in your local legal community is rewarding, it can be refreshing to have colleagues to call on in other practice areas and geographic areas of the state.

Prior to applying to the YLD Leadership Academy, my involvement in the Bar had been primarily at the local level, serving in various leadership roles for the Gainesville Northeastern Judicial Circuit Bar Association. Since graduating from the YLD Leadership Academy, I've stayed involved in the YLD as the Northern District Representative for the YLD Representative Council and co-chair for the YLD Family Law Committee.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SARAH R. TRAHAN

### *What advice do you have for young lawyers?*

"Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity."

This simple principle is known as Hanlon's Razor and keeps me grounded in my practice. This little nugget of wisdom was passed down to me by my dad several years ago, and I have since passed it along to countless colleagues and clients over the years. I find that looking at the actions of others through this lens helps you stay calm and takes the personal reaction out of otherwise emotionally charged situations. Too often I see folks hurt by the actions of others, and they stew on the meaning of what happened, attributing premeditated action to another, when in reality there was a lack of mutual understanding, or basic consideration on the part of the other person involved. I would tell young lawyers to keep this in mind for themselves and their clients. I have found time and time again that if I come at a situation from the perspective of educating someone, or clearing up confusion, rather than being on the defensive, the outcome is better for all involved. YLD

## Member Spotlight | Middle District

Each quarter, The YLD Review highlights three of the Young Lawyers Division's most impactful members—one from each federal judicial district. Those featured in our Member Spotlight serve both the YLD and their local communities, excel in their practice and maintain the highest level of professionalism.

# James Banter

### *Tell us about yourself.*

I am originally from a small town, Fort Valley, Georgia, until college took me to Kentucky where I attended Asbury University. I, however, returned home to Georgia to attend Mercer University Law School. Today, I live in Macon with my wife Sarah, and our two young children (ages 3 and 2 months). We are in the young kids' stage of life, which means we are busy chasing nap times, playing with toy trains and playing outside. When I'm not chasing kids, or stepping on toy trains/Legos, you'll likely find me on the pickleball court, cheering on Georgia Tech or sneaking in a nap of my own.

### *What is your practice area?*

After graduating from Mercer Law, I was able to clerk for Hon. Charles H. Weigle, Magistrate Judge in the Middle District of Georgia. This was a terrific experience to learn about the practice of law before heading to private practice. Today, I practice at James Bates Brannan Groover, focusing on commercial and corporate litigation. I also handle local government issues. I have had the honor of representing small closely held companies to large national corporations. My practice has expanded over the last few years to serving as outside county attorney for several Georgia counties, providing both general counsel and litigation support. Over the years I have had the opportunity to appear in all courts, from municipal courts to appearances before the Supreme Court of Georgia and the Eleventh Circuit.

However, as my practice has developed, I like to call it a Swiss-Army Knife practice. There are areas of the law I have more experience in than others, but I have been blessed to have had a wide range of opportunities and experiences that help me meet any client wherever they are. This has been possible due to me surrounding myself with older, wiser lawyers who have taken the time to invest in me to show me the right way to practice law. Practicing law can be

tough—so surround yourself with people you like practicing law with.

### *What is your involvement with the YLD?*

I was not initially involved in the YLD, and I regret missing out on those first few years. However, I have tried to make up for lost time. In the fall of 2019, Ivy Cadle told me about the YLD Leadership Academy and encouraged me to apply. I was selected for the Leadership Academy Class of 2020 (the best class ever) and fell in love with the YLD and its people immediately. It has been an honor to have been a co-director, with the best co-directors ever, of the Leadership Academy the last three years. I am biased, but I believe that Leadership Academy is the best program that the YLD offers. Now as an old YLDer, I am looking forward to enjoying my last two years before I age out. Sarah and I will always be indebted to the YLD for the great years and lifelong friendships the YLD has given us.

### *What advice do you have for young lawyers?*

I always try to remember to take care of my clients, take care of our profession and take care of myself. These all go hand in hand,



PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES BANTER

and each cannot succeed if the other fails to be taken care of. As for practical advice, I was taught not to put anything in writing that you'd be embarrassed if the judge, or your grandmother, read. It never helps you, or your clients, to be snarky in emails. Professionalism always wins. YLD

## UPCOMING YLD MEETINGS

**Midyear** | Jan. 15-17, 2026

Omni Hotel at the Battery Atlanta  
Atlanta, Georgia

**Annual** | June 11-14, 2026

Omni Amelia Island Resort & Spa  
Fernandina Beach, Florida

**Spring** | April 23-25, 2026

Kimpton Hotel Arras  
Asheville, North Carolina



For more information, visit [www.gabar.org/yld-meetings](http://www.gabar.org/yld-meetings).

## Member Spotlight | Southern District

Each quarter, The YLD Review highlights three of the Young Lawyers Division's most impactful members—one from each federal judicial district. Those featured in our Member Spotlight serve both the YLD and their local communities, excel in their practice and maintain the highest level of professionalism.

# Markus Russell

### *Tell us about yourself.*

Hi, I'm Markus Russell! I'm originally from Manassas, Virginia, but these days I proudly call Augusta, Georgia, home. The Army brought me here after spending nearly 10 years serving as a Human Intelligence Collector, traveling all over the country and the world. It was an incredible experience that taught me a lot about people, leadership and adaptability. I'm married and have two retired racing greyhounds who keep life interesting. When I'm not in the courtroom, you can usually find me coaching volleyball. Sharing my love for the game with young athletes is one of my favorite things to do.

### *What is your practice area?*

I'm currently a prosecutor in the Augusta Judicial Circuit, a role I truly love. I found my way here in search of more courtroom experience, and District Attorney Jared Williams gave me that opportunity. Before this, I worked in real estate and probate law, which were both rewarding in their own right, but I missed the action of the courtroom. In law school, I had an incredible mentor, the late James F. Findlay. He was sharp, composed and could negotiate or pivot in a moment—all while maintaining professionalism and grace. He once told me,

"If you want to get better, you've got to do the hard things."

For me, that meant trying cases. So, I took that advice to heart, and it's been one of the best decisions I've made.

### *What is your involvement with the YLD?*

I serve on the YLD Board of Directors and am a proud graduate of the 2024 YLD Leadership Academy. I first heard about the YLD through colleagues, and when the Leadership Academy opportunity came up, I applied, and I'm so glad I did. The program was a game-changer. The best part of YLD is the community. The networking, the support and the willingness to help one another truly makes it wonderful. With so many attorneys from diverse practice areas, it's an incredible resource for referrals, collaboration and simply learning from others who love what they do.

### *What advice do you have for young lawyers?*

If I could give one piece of advice to young lawyers, it would be this: don't be afraid to explore different fields of law. When I started law school, I was working as a paralegal in a real estate and probate firm and fully expected to stay in that lane. But over time, I realized that work, while meaningful, wasn't where my passion truly was. It felt repetitive,

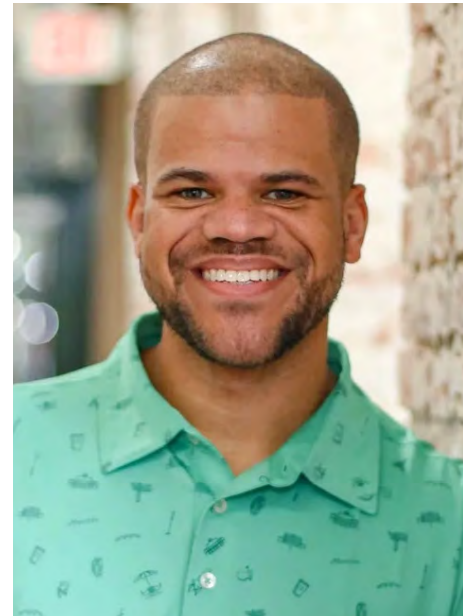


PHOTO COURTESY OF MARKUS RUSSELL

and I craved more challenges and variety. That led me, somewhat reluctantly at first, into criminal law, which I had always said I'd never do. But the moment I began prosecuting, I was hooked. It's tough, it's demanding, but it's also deeply fulfilling to see the impact you can have on your community. And no two cases are ever the same; every day brings a new puzzle to solve. I never would've found that excitement if I hadn't taken the leap. <sup>YLD</sup>



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State Bar  
of Georgia

### ► HSMT, FROM PAGE 9

requests for shadowing opportunities and letters of recommendation. However, they may one day be lawyers you wish to hire, end up working alongside, or even argue cases before.

Regardless, your investment in the next generation will be worth the effort of paying it forward." <sup>YLD</sup>

Kelsie J. Mattox is the solicitor for the cities of Alpharetta and Milton. Speight is a YLD Director and co-chair of several YLD Committees.



# The Other Side of the Bar: The Importance of Service to Lawyers



**Chas  
Whitehead**

**Finding the “why” to the work we do** is a journey without an end, both in our careers and in life. However, the “why” is essential to shaping our approach to being lawyers and members of our communities. The fortunate thing is that we are surrounded by causes to support and most, if not all, want your help. Donating your time and/or money is not a one-way street. Involvement with a charity or nonprofit opens doors to connections and interactions that you would never otherwise have. Moreover, it is a perfect opportunity to get out of the bubble of lawyers that we usually interact with—people who are not only potential clients, but also potential friends.

You will find the more you give to and learn from others, the more well-rounded you are as a person and a lawyer. You never know when a useful piece of knowledge or contact will come in handy at work or in

your personal life. What is more, is that your efforts benefit not only yourself and your community, but they benefit our profession. We often lose sight of the fact that most people do not have lawyer friends, and they certainly do not have lawyer friends that volunteer to improve their community. You single-handedly have the opportunity to be the reason why your community views lawyers in a positive light.

Making the most of your time supporting a cause goes back to your “why.” For me: I love golf and the things it can teach us. As an example of (1) just how easy it is to volunteer and (2) that there truly is a niche cause for everyone: I am involved with the First Tee of the Golden Isles. This charity involves teaching local kids, no matter their demographic, life lessons through the game of golf in a safe environment. I could not dream of a better program and participating is both fun and rewarding. I have no doubt that this same experience awaits any of you who is willing to try. The most ironic thing is that the benefits of volunteering are lessened if benefiting is the goal; you have to

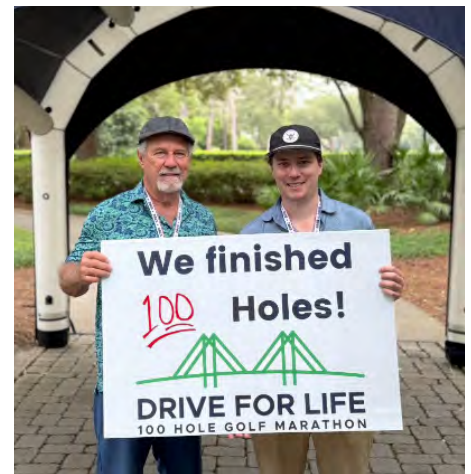


PHOTO COURTESY OF CHAS WHITEHEAD

find what drives you and why you want to do it. It is unmistakable though, if you find a way to give back that is true to you, you will no doubt be all the better for it. *YLD*

*Chas Whitehead is an attorney at Mayfield Law in Brunswick, Georgia. A graduate of Mercer Law and Georgia Southern University, he represents individuals in a wide variety of personal injury matters.*

# LEGAL WRITING SUMMIT

**MAR. 13  
10AM–2PM**

Sponsored by the YLD and ACYL

# Search for the Servant Leader: Young Lawyers Needed on Nonprofit Boards



**Meredith L.  
Layman**

**Local nonprofit boards need young talent** filling their board member seats to best serve their communities and advance their vision. Young lawyers are perfectly positioned to answer this call to service. The aim of this article is to prepare young lawyers for board service by answering common questions and addressing hesitations that may present a barrier to service.

## But I'm Not Ready?!?

You are ready. Perhaps a little courage is needed, but you are ready. In the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.:

[E]verybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.<sup>1</sup>

Legal professionals are uniquely suited for board positions. Ultimately, our profession is prosecuting or defending actions resulting from shortcomings in our communities, and we have received special training to respond to these challenges. Lawyers also have non-legal skills to offer boards such as persuasive writing, charismatic speaking, critical thinking, problem solving and being able to research analytically.

There are options for lawyers and laymen to brush up on how to be a better board

member. For example, United Way of the Coastal Empire provides a Board Readiness Program covering fundraising, ethics, fiscal and legal responsibilities, DEI, writing, strategic planning, board and staff relationships, and advocacy and ambassadorship.<sup>2</sup>

## Here I Am; Send Me. Where To?

Think of the causes or issues that stir your spirit into action. Let your passion guide you to a nonprofit that shares your vision for a better future. If a nonprofit doesn't jump to the forefront of your mind, there are resources to match your interests to community needs. A simple step is to go to your local United Way volunteer page and sort the agencies by your interests to springboard your research into specific nonprofits.

Another option is an area leadership course such as Leadership Savannah.<sup>3</sup> These courses are typically organized by the local business association or Chamber of Commerce to educate community leaders on local issues and teach skills to tackle those problems. In reviewing the graduate lists, you will likely spy the names of your mentors and career role models.

The YLD Leadership Academy<sup>4</sup> is another option. The thoughtful programming gives snapshots of the ways young lawyers can lead in the profession and the community. The program puts you in contact with people and issues across Georgia because leading lawyers serve the public in their capacity as a lawyer and a human.

## But What About My Boss?

Not every boss sees the inherent value of service, but some just need a little light to shine the way. Larger firms and companies will typically have a variety of service incentives because good people build good companies, and the good their workers do in the community reflects well on the business. The capabilities of small to mid-sized

firms may limit what incentives are practical, but some options include days set aside for community service projects or giving workers an extra floating day of paid time off to serve.

Board service can be easier to negotiate with a supervisor whose heart is wavering on service because it can be more flexible than traditional labor service. Most boards will meet once or twice a month over a lunch hour with the preparation for the meeting taking place at the members' discretion. After COVID, virtual attendance has become a more accepted option for those potential leaders who are chained to an office over what ought to be lunch. Remaining board obligations are typically able to be met in the evenings or over the weekend.

Ultimately, if your employer is unwilling to participate in improving the community in which they do business, consider whether your servant heart is being called elsewhere. A servant leader is committed, empathetic and hard working. Failing to recognize the asset of employing and cultivating a servant leader will cost a business more than a few billable hours.

If you were waiting for a sign, if you were waiting for a call ... this is it! You are needed in your community. Do all the good you can in every way you can.<sup>5</sup> YLD

Meredith L. Layman is deputy general counsel for Great West Casualty Company in Sioux City, Nebraska.

## Endnotes

1. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Drum Major Instinct Sermon*, at Ebenezer Baptist Church (Feb. 4, 1968).
2. <https://uwce.org/young-leaders/brp/>.
3. <https://www.savannahchamber.com/leadership-savannah/>.
4. <https://www.gabar.org/bar-communities/young-lawyers-division/about/yld-leadership-academy>.
5. "[E]mploy whatever God has entrusted you with, in doing good, all possible good, in every possible kind and degree..." Rev. John Welsey, *Sermon 50 Use of Money* (1872).

# The Life of a Tax Attorney



**Harrison "Harry"  
Alex**

**Normally when I tell people that I am** a tax attorney, I get met with a polite nod and a facial expression plainly desperate to change the conversation. If this sounds familiar, rest assured because I have stopped taking it personally. I understand that, for most people, dealing with anything tax-related is at best a boring chore and at worst a painful, anxiety-inducing nightmare. While we operate in what is ostensibly a voluntary tax system, that does not mean that taxpayers are required to enjoy their heavily incentivized participation.

If I get something other than a look of dread at my stated practice area, I start by boiling what I do down to the simplest terms: I deal with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) for people. With a background in tax controversy, I generally get involved after the IRS or their state-level counterpart has contacted someone by pointing out an alleged error or oversight. Working in a manner more akin to a litigator than a CPA, I help navigate a client's best interests through the admittedly complicated IRS bureaucracy and tax code. That means that my days typically start with a call to the IRS, as catching them first thing in the morning is the best chance to skip their long hold times. Even the IRS's expedited "practitioner priority service" telephone line is not enough to save those of us with tax credentials from waiting to speak to an actual human being. As members of other legal communities have assuredly found in analogous conversations, congeniality and rapport-building go a long way towards making calls such as these productive. While our legal system is adversarial, we do not have to be antagonists.

Much of my days are filled with drafting correspondence to the IRS or various state tax authorities, explaining the merits of our clients' cases and the manner in which our

clients' issues need to be fixed. Usually that means diving into tax code and regulations to get the exact language of what is expected of both parties and parsing how it applies to our client's situation. I also often consult and then cite the IRS's Internal Revenue Manual, a publicly available instruction manual that walks IRS employees of all levels through their various responsibilities and how to handle specific topics and tasks. On most occasions, I even live up to the "attorney" portion of my title by reading and quoting case law to show how the courts have handled similar situations.

My practice area, however, is not entirely reactive. In fact, proactive tax planning can be significantly more productive and beneficial to clients. When not responding to the IRS or another department of revenue, I am usually answering tax-related questions. While I admittedly get a bit of a thrill from diving into a complicated tax return or set of financials and looking for the puzzle pieces that can lend some situational understanding to my clients or identifying potential windfalls for clients, I often have to differentiate my position from that of a Certified Public Accountant (CPA). Putting together a tax return itself rarely falls into my lap, but drafting a tax memorandum or

opinion can serve as a road map or permission slip for a client's CPA to prepare a tax filing in a legal, advantageous way. Under the right circumstances and with enough level of certainty on a tax position, a tax opinion can even protect a client from certain IRS penalties. At the very least, I hope to provide clients with clarity against the backdrop of the lengthy, cross-referencing U.S. and international tax codes.

Tax practice is not preparing returns and pulling all-nighters before the April 15 filing deadline. It is more than just helping non-filers get back into compliance with the tax authorities. Tax practice is also untangling complicated tax questions to find answers for unsure tax clients, parsing the black and white tax code to provide counsel for our clients' gray situations. It is using expertise to advocate for clients in a system that can be confusing and intimidating. While our practice area can be understandably dry, there is more overlap and more in common between tax practice and other practice areas than many realize. It is easier to talk to a tax attorney than one might think. YLD

*Harrison "Harry" Alex is an associate at MendenFreiman. He currently serves as a member-at-large on the YLD Representative Council.*



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# Southern District of Georgia Federal Bar Association Holds Younger Lawyers Event



**Amelia  
Stevens**

On Oct. 9, 2025, the Southern District of Georgia Chapter of the Federal Bar Association hosted its inaugural “Younger Lawyers” event—a lunch and learn featuring a discussion with U.S. Magistrate Judge Christopher L. Ray. The luncheon was geared toward judicial clerks, associates and newer partners who practice or are interested in practicing in federal court, particularly in the Southern District of Georgia. Attendees had the rare opportunity to hear from, ask questions of and interact with a federal judge in a more relaxed setting outside the courtroom.

Judge Ray gave attendees a firsthand account of his journey to the bench, a detailed explanation of the role and function of a magistrate judge, practical practice pointers, a behind-the-scenes look into his decision-making process and sage advice for younger lawyers learning the ins and outs of federal practice. He brought with him a unique experience and perspective that proved insightful and encouraging to younger lawyers.

A New York native, Judge Ray earned his Bachelor of Arts in military and diplomatic history from Princeton University in 1991, followed by his Juris Doctor from Fordham University School of Law in 1994. At Fordham, Ray was a fixture on the Dean’s list, edited the *Fordham International Law Journal* and excelled in moot court competitions. Upon graduation, Ray served in the Army Judge Advocate General Corps for many years, reaching the rank of captain, before joining the law firm then known as Oliver Maner & Gray in 1999. Ray was made a partner in 2003 where he maintained a successful private practice up until his appointment to the bench.

In 2019, the district judges of the Southern District of Georgia appointed Ray to



**Ben  
Tuten**

serve as a U.S. Magistrate Judge for the Southern District, succeeding the legendary Judge G. R. Smith, a role which he continues in today. Judge Ray was a founding member of the Federal Bar Association’s (FBA) Southern District of Georgia chapter and remains actively involved, along with several other members of the bench.

A key takeaway from the event included the responsibility of lawyers to use their skills to better our profession and respective communities. A champion for this cause, Judge Ray encouraged younger lawyers to incorporate public service and civic engagement into their practices. The FBA’s Southern District of Georgia chapter has undertaken a new civics education initiative, which will offer lawyers opportunities to get involved.

Through this initiative, the FBA is partnering with the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System to bring groups of 10th grade government students to the federal courthouse on several occasions over the coming academic year for a mock sentencing program. The experience will involve the presentation of a truncated, mock, criminal sentencing exercise in which the students will be asked to discuss and debate what sentence they would impose. Attorney volunteers are needed both as presenters and leaders of small group discussions.

Additionally, the Southern District of Georgia is one of only a few districts across the country that does not have a federal defender for indigent defendants. As a result, the Southern District of Georgia utilizes a panel of private practitioners who are appointed under the Criminal Justice Act (CJA) to represent indigent clients. Serving on the CJA Panel is an excellent opportunity for young lawyers to serve the public, diversify



U.S. Magistrate Judge Christopher L. Ray

PHOTO COURTESY OF U.S. MAGISTRATE JUDGE CHRISTOPHER L. RAY

their practice and gain invaluable practical and courtroom experience. The Southern District of Georgia offers training opportunities and resources for interested attorneys.

The inaugural “Younger Lawyers” event was well received, and the FBA’s Southern District of Georgia chapter plans to offer regular programming and networking opportunities to its members. Anyone interested in joining the chapter or participating in these programs may visit [www.fedbar.org/southern-district-of-georgia-chapter](http://www.fedbar.org/southern-district-of-georgia-chapter) or contact for more information.

The Southern District of Georgia Chapter of the Federal Bar Association extends many thanks to Judge Ray for his participation and to Gilbert and Jones Court Reporting for sponsoring the event. *YLD*

Amelia Stevens, an associate at Oliver Maner in Savannah, serves on the YLD Representative Council.

Ben Tuten is an associate at Oliver Maner in Savannah.



# 2026 YLD SIGNATURE FUNDRAISER

## *Sponsorship Information*

Please consider becoming a sponsor of the 19th Annual YLD Signature Fundraiser benefiting Middle Georgia Justice.

### *— Exclusive Presenting Sponsorship —* **DIAMOND | \$7,500**

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### **BRONZE | \$500**

- 2 admission tickets
- Recognition on all YLD social media platforms

### **GENERAL ADMISSION TICKETS**

- 1 ticket | \$150
- 2 tickets | \$250
- Public interest lawyer | \$100 (government and judiciary)
- Law school students | \$50

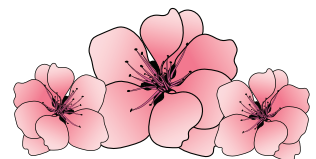
## **HOW TO BECOME A SPONSOR**

To become a sponsor of the YLD Signature Fundraiser, please visit [www.gabar.org/signaturefundraiser](http://www.gabar.org/signaturefundraiser).

Checks should be made payable to the State Bar of Georgia Foundation, with “YLD Signature Fundraiser” in the memo line and mailed to: State Bar of Georgia Foundation, Attn: YLD Signature Fundraiser, 104 Marietta St. NW, Suite 100, Atlanta, GA 30303.

Please consult with your accountant or attorney regarding whether all or part of your donation may be tax deductible.

*Questions?* Email [yldsponsors@gabar.org](mailto:yldsponsors@gabar.org).





# The YLD in Action



At the 2025 Fall Meeting, members of the YLD packed and prepared bags for Northwest Georgia Hunger Ministries Inc. to support students in the Lookout Mountain region who are facing food insecurity.



The YLD Solo Practice and Small Firm Committee hosted an energizing Hustle to Hands-On Workshop CLE to help lawyers stop only hustling in their practice and start building systems that support stability, profit and growth.



The YLD Child Protection and Advocacy and Community Service Projects Committees volunteered with Empty Stocking Fund picking and packing holiday gift orders for children in need.



The YLD Community Service Projects Committee joined Trees Atlanta for a fun and rewarding morning of volunteering in East Atlanta.





The YLD Ethics and Professionalism Committee hosted “A Fireside Chat With Justice Bethel and Friends” at the 2025 Fall Meeting.



The YLD Women in the Profession (WIP) volunteered with Ronald McDonald House in Atlanta on Thursday, Nov. 20. The Ronald McDonald Houses provide temporary, home-like lodging for families with children receiving medical treatment at nearby hospitals. WIP partnered with Chef Jeff to prepare a meal for the families staying at the home.



The YLD Criminal Law Committee, YLD Litigation Committee and the Atlanta Bar Association’s Criminal Law Section hosted Judges Aren’t Scary—our not-so-spooky social hour with some truly Honorable guests.

# Embracing the Transition



**Chelsea J.  
Harris**

**When I started law school in 2017, I was** dead set on becoming a public defender. A reason I chose my specific law school (Go Bears!) was because it had a Public Defender clinic. I refused to interview with civil law firms, focused on criminal law classes and even worked in the Public Defender clinic once I became a 3L. I was 100% sure this was the career I wanted, and I did not deviate from that plan, ignoring any and all advice to try out any other subject.

Like most of us, I had insane anxiety, though, and I wanted to set myself up with a job before I graduated. I was lucky enough to land a two-year term placement with the Eleventh Circuit's Staff Attorney's Office, knowing that as soon as my term ended, I would be sending in applications to the surrounding public defenders offices to start my "real" work there.

## What Am I Going to Do?

Soon after I started working as a staff attorney, my mind started to shift. I was exposed to so many new areas of the law that I originally thought would be boring and uninteresting. I started to ask myself: "Was I sure I wanted to do public defense?" "How I could I even know, when I didn't try anything else?" "How could I even market myself to any other area of law when I pigeon-holed myself?" "WHAT AM I GOING TO DO?!"

After a brief (maybe six-month-long) panic, I turned my distress into curiosity. Instead of fear, I looked at my future like a new, fresh opportunity to learn and try new things—and that is exactly what I did.

I became curious about civil litigation, and I worked at a civil litigation firm for a year. There, I learned about the billable hour and how much I did not like it. So, I moved on. Did I worry about how others may per-

ceive my move? Of course, I'm only human. However, I knew that if I did not find what I truly wanted to do, I would never be truly fulfilled. If I had not have moved on, I would not have come across the amazing opportunity to work for a federal judge for a year, where I learned the true value of working with people you love.

As my term ended, I still found myself unsure where I wanted to land. At this point, I was not even sure I wanted to be a litigator. To confirm that thought, I decided to teach at a law school for a year. There, I learned patience and the power of a good mentor. I also confirmed that I did not want to practice, and that I really wanted to go back to the court system.

Ultimately, after almost five years of job hopping, I was lucky enough to land a career position with the federal court system. I finally feel like I am at home in my career. I'm not wondering what my next move will be, and I am feeling fulfilled as an attorney. I work with people I adore, and every day, I am working on projects I truly care about.

So, why am I outlining my early legal career for you? Well, I want to reiterate to the newer YLD members that it is okay to question what you want to do. I imagine many of

you may have just passed the bar exam and are officially working in your first post-law school job. While some of you may be enjoying your new roles, I am equally sure that some of you think you have made a grave mistake. You may be questioning yourself and your motivations—even questioning if you enjoy the work you are doing. And you know what? That is okay.

## It's Okay to Switch It Up

If you spent your law school career thinking you knew exactly what you wanted, do not feel like you cannot change your mind. If you are in a job that you do not think is a good fit, it is okay to switch it up.

Move forward without fear of judgment and remember you have this one life to live. You deserve to live it in a career you enjoy! Even more importantly, do not look at your past work as a waste. Each job and experience serves as a teaching moment. Embrace the transitions, welcome the unknown and enjoy the ride. YLD

*Chelsea J. Harris, a career staff attorney at the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit in Atlanta, serves as a YLD Representative Director.*



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# The Current and the Case: On the Kinship of Fly Fishing and Law



**Sam  
Joyce**



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**There is, perhaps, no pastime more apt** to mirror the noble practice of the law than that of fly fishing. Each demands from its disciple a quietude of mind amidst restless motion. A capacity to divine the temper of the waters before daring to cast one's line, or one's argument.

In the angler's art, as in advocacy, timing is sovereign. The unthinking cast, made in haste or vanity, is seldom rewarded; but the measured flick of the wrist, bestowed at the moment when wind, light and current conspire, brings its due reward. So, too, the attorney who tempers zeal with patience, who knows when to advance his cause and when to wait upon the tide of circumstance to turn. Flexibility, not stubbornness, keeps both the line taut and the case alive.

No river runs the same course twice, just as no two cases are the same. The current shifts and waters rise and fall. Akin with litigation: witnesses waver, new evidence emerges and the temper of the bench may ebb or flow. The wise practitioner, like the seasoned angler, adjusts his craft to the current, not in servile reaction but in studied harmony with its motion.



## ATTENTION:

There are important updates to the Continuing Legal Education (CLE) requirements for members of the State Bar of Georgia, effective Jan. 1, 2026, by order of the Supreme Court of Georgia.

## HIGHLIGHTS:

- Biennial CLE requirement (every 2 years)
- First compliance period: 2026-2027
- First biennial deadline: Dec. 31, 2027
- 18 CLE hours required, including 3 ethics hours and 2 professionalism hours
- CLE exemption for any active member having reached 40 years as an active member of the State Bar of Georgia without having been suspended or disbarred for violating the Georgia Rules of Professional Conduct.
- No changes for the 2025 CLE requirement (Deadline: March 31, 2026)

## MORE INFO:



Let it not be forgotten that both arts are governed by a moral current as well. The river must be treated with reverence, not plundered. The law must be treated with honor, not amorality. Each exists within an ecosystem: the angler's stream, the lawyer's Bar and both are sustained only by integrity and restraint.

In truth, the finest advocate, like the finest fisherman, triumphs not through hasty

action, but through the stillness of perception. That rare ability to wait upon the water, to read the current and to cast, with precision and grace. *YLD*

*Sam Joyce is an associate at Buzzell, Welsh & Hill LLP in Macon. Joyce serves as president of the Middle Georgia Trial Lawyers Association.*



# YLD Leadership Academy 20th Anniversary

1. (L-R) Bill Clark and YLD Leadership Academy Alumni Subcommittee Co-chair Alex Clark.
2. Hon. Amanda Heath, Superior Court of Augusta Judicial Circuit, delivered the keynote speech.
3. (L-R) Justice John J. Ellington, Judge Ken Hodges, Judge Sara Doyle, Presiding Justice Sarah Warren, YLD President Veronica Cox, Judge Christopher McFadden, Judge Amanda Heath and State Bar of Georgia Immediate Past President Ivy Cadle, along with representatives of the U.S. Marines.
4. (L-R) Veronica Cox and Hannah Couch.
5. (L-R) 2019 YLD President Hon. Rizza O'Connor, 2008 YLD President Elena Kaplan, 2018 YLD President Nicole Leet, 2012 YLD President Stephanie Kirijan Cooper, 2001 YLD President S. Kendall Butterworth, 1993 YLD President Betsy Hodges, 2025 YLD President Veronica Cox and 2024 YLD President Brittanie Browning.







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State Bar  
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Carlos Fernández, Editor  
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# JUDGING PANEL VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

**Judging Panel volunteers are needed for the 2026 Georgia High School Mock Trial regional, district and state finals competitions!**

Members of the State Bar of Georgia have supported the High School Mock Trial Competition for 37 seasons. We are asking for a few hours of your time as a presiding judge or evaluator (juror).

You can receive 1 Hour of CLE credit when you judge or score a round.

**EARN  
CLE**

Regional  
Competitions  
Jan. 29-Feb. 1

District Competitions  
Feb. 21 & 28

State Finals  
Competition  
March 13-15

► For more information, contact the Mock Trial Office:  
404-527-8779 | [mocktrial@gabar.org](mailto:mocktrial@gabar.org)



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