

Comments From The Chair, My Back Pages

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By: Steven B. Lesser

“Grab hold of a star and great things will happen.”

– **Fred Gray**, *Forum Annual Meeting, Boca Raton, Florida, April 18, 2015*

Industry commentators observe that reported decisions have languished in recent years due to an increased use of alternative dispute resolution and private arbitration. Yet despite a drop in reported decisions (or perhaps because of it), the Forum has had plenty to discuss at our national programs in its quest toward “building the best construction lawyers.” This past year the Forum has directed its focus on the practical aspects of our practice and how to be better at what we do. Attendees have gained insight from top-notch construction lawyers and industry experts on how to tell when someone is lying, nuances for terminating construction partners when the project tanks, how to handle the \$200,000 construction dispute, tips on handling OSHA violations, and how to avoid a false claims mess.

At our Annual Meeting we learned about drones, pre-bid risk assessment, tips for in-house counsel, strategy for triggering insurance coverage, and how to tear apart a scheduling expert. But an important feature of our programming this past year provided attendees with an opportunity to reflect on issues that transcend the law. A recent article by New York Times columnist David Brooks entitled “The Moral Bucket List” distinguished between two sets of virtues: the resume virtues and those virtues that may be included in a eulogy about the person. Certainly some may initially join the Forum to build their resumes, but as frequently is the case, they soon realize that the Forum is much more. The virtues realized by the Forum go beyond just construction law. This past year, programming focused on dealing with substance abuse, fitness, and wellness, along with life lessons from those who have lived through adversity. Kat Cole taught us, “When you walk with purpose you collide with destiny.” Judge Bernice Donald cautioned, “You cannot afford the luxury of hate.” These sessions served to inspire us as lawyers and individuals.

At the Annual Meeting Diversity Luncheon, Fred Gray- an 84-year-old civil rights icon- described himself as a young African-American teenager in the 1940s with a dream to destroy segregation wherever it existed. He did that and

along the way created history with Rosa Parks and a 26-year-old unknown pastor, Martin Luther King, Jr. His passion along with his drive crystallized a vision and a simple call to action to embrace the law, pursue change, abolish injustice, and make our world better. He emphasized the need to mentor and guide young lawyers, just as he did when seeking guidance early in his career from Thurgood Marshall. At one point in the presentation, Fred gazed up at the audience and encouraged them to “Grab hold of a star and great things will happen.” On that day, Fred Gray challenged Forum members to look beyond themselves and renew their societal obligation to promote change, be charitable, and help young lawyers. As the largest construction lawyer group in the world, we can proudly acknowledge that we have done just that. Not only has the Forum continued to provide cutting-edge construction programming and published scholarly books, we have also created opportunities for young lawyers and excelled through charitable giving.

The Forum promotes diversity through its Diversity Fellowship program. Through our young lawyer initiatives such as the “Construction Lawyer Practicum” and our first-timer breakfasts, we have built a home for young lawyers and provided mentorship opportunities. Under the leadership of Dan Goldberg, the Forum has raised more than \$75,000 for charities, including \$23,000 alone for Fred Gray’s Tuskegee Human and Civil Rights Multicultural Center in Alabama. At every Forum meeting, our attendees recognize the need to contribute and to give back to the community. Our diversity initiatives and charitable giving demonstrate that the Forum is more than just about construction law. We have answered the call to provide more value to being a Forum member.

For young construction lawyers, if you want to become involved, it is within your reach. As Cat Stevens aptly stated: “Life is like a maze of doors, and they all open from the side you’re on.” Open the door to great education, wonderful people, and a path to a meaningful career. At the Forum on Construction Law you will learn the law, meet your colleagues, and collide with your destiny. For those reading this Column who may not yet be a Forum member or to members who are not active- it’s time to jump-start your career.

As this is my last Construction Lawyer column, I extend my thanks to the Forum for providing me with an incredible and everlasting experience to lead this great organization. When I reflect back on my path, I marvel at the wonderful opportunities that I have been given to grow as a construction lawyer and a person. What I have learned along the way is that the success of this organization is attributed to many outstanding volunteers who participate in making the Forum great. As we anticipate the terms of our incoming Chair, Harper Heckman, and Chair-Elect, Will Hill, the Forum is in great hands, and we look-forward to celebrating our 40th anniversary in 2016.

Being a Forum member is an experience-not just an affiliation. The Forum is your star! Grab hold of it, blow the roof off your construction career, and be the best construction lawyer you can be!

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