

August 6, 2007

STATE BAR SUING ETHICS ADVOCATE IS BAD LAWYER JOKE

Many of my friends are lawyers. It is not that I seek them out but since there are more lawyers in the world than fleas on a dog, the law of averages says some of them are bound to become friends. Therefore, I hope my legal buddies will take the following observation in the loving way in which it is offered: Lawyers have the public relations skills of a box of salt.

The august State Bar of Georgia is suing self-appointed ethics watchdog George Anderson, of Rome for acting like a lawyer. Maybe Anderson should turn around and sue the bar for slander. Who wants to be accused of walking around acting self-important and spouting Latin phrases? Let's face it: Lawyers aren't exactly held in the highest esteem. Have you heard a lot of jokes about dentists? No? Pharmacists? No? Water buffaloes? No? Have you heard a lot of jokes about lawyers? I rest my case.

I served on the State Ethics Commission for a number of years before it was neutered by Sonny Perdue's crowd. We were a diverse group of commissioners, but we shared one thing in common. We all groaned when we saw George Anderson hauling his boxes of materials into the hearing room. We groaned a lot because Anderson and his boxes were at every meeting we held. The man would have filed an ethics complaint against Mother Teresa if he thought it proper, and would have had 14 crates of paper to back up his claim.

George Anderson caused our small staff a lot of unnecessary work and made our meetings long and tedious and the commissioners cranky. Frankly, I was not very patient with him at the beginning of my tenure on the commission. Over the years, however, I began to understand that this is a pretty good system in which we live when a small bookstore owner in Rome can probe the motives and practices of the entrenched political establishment. It says we are all equal, despite what some politicians may think. Anderson's batting average wasn't very good during my days on the commission and it hasn't gotten much better since, but on those rare occasions when he scored a direct hit, a powerful politician who thought he or she was above the law would go down in flames. It proved the system works.

After my term on the Ethics Commission, Anderson sold his bookstore in Rome and formed a company called Ethics in Government Group, which he incorporated. Last year, he petitioned the Forsyth County Superior Court to require the release of documents from the county's Board of Ethics. That is what seems to have gotten the State Bar of Georgia's silk stockings in a wad. Filing complaints on behalf of corporations is against the rules, says the bar. Evidently, bullying little guys is not.

The state bar claims that it tried to get Anderson to sign a cease-and-desist order, but the ethics gadfly says he wouldn't sign it because he hasn't done anything wrong.

The snickers and snorts you hear are coming from the political establishment, which has endured the slings and arrows of George Anderson for years and are delighted to see him in the hot seat for a change. But you and I should be pulling for the guy. While most of us sit around and complain about the sad state of politics, George Anderson is out trying to do something about it. Not always well, but at least he is trying.

I am going to do my lawyer friends a favor and give them some free advice (a concept no doubt foreign to their profession). Remember that the ultimate decision on innocence and guilt in this country does not rest in the court of law. The final arbiter is the court of public opinion. The State Bar of Georgia may be well within its legal rights to sue George Anderson, but as far as the public is concerned, the bar has already lost its case no matter what the courts say. The bar's recent action is just the latest and most unfortunate lawyer joke.