

"Legends of the Law"

John M. Silverstein

2002 Joseph Branch Professionalism Award Recipient

by Deb Newton with Howard Satsky

In this by-line, written by various contributing author members of the Wake County Bar, we explore the personality and drive behind some of North Carolina's most interesting lawyers. If you know someone who you think fits this description, please write to us at mike@eghs.com and tell us about her or him.

For this month's installment, we present a lawyer whom the Wake County Bar deems a pillar of professionalism. He is John Silverstein, the Bar's choice for the "Joseph Branch Professionalism Award" for 2002.

"JUSTICE SHALL THOU PURSUE . . . JUSTICE IS TRUTH IN ACTION"

Annually, the Wake County Bar Association chooses from among its number a lawyer whom his or her peers believe exhibits the highest ideals of professionalism, ethical and moral code. This year's winner of the Joseph Branch Professionalism Award is John M. Silverstein, Satsky & Silverstein, L.L.P., of Raleigh, North Carolina.

John Silverstein was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on 1 February 1946, and raised in Charleston, West Virginia. He is a 1971 graduate of the University of North Carolina School of Law. He is a member of the Wake County Bar Association, where he has served on the Executive Committee, and he served as our Bar's President during 1994. He is a member of the North Carolina Bar Association, where he has chaired the Local Bar Services Committee. John is also a member of the American Bar Association.

John's career includes both public service and the private practice of law. He served as an Assistant Attorney General for the North Carolina Department of Justice, Office of the Attorney General, where, shortly thereafter, he rose to the senior position of Special Deputy Attorney General. John served as a member, Chairman, and as counsel for the Raleigh Board of Adjustment from 1982 to 1988.

John's law partner is Howard Satsky. Together since 1976, they have a general practice of law, and otherwise concentrate in the areas of property law, administrative law, and municipal law. Howard, an admiring partner, tells the story of the man, and the foundations of his character, better than I ever could, so I'll simply recount Howard's story, responsive to our eleventh hour call to tell us about this extraordinary lawyer:

"For most of us sports nuts in the South who grew up in the fifties and early sixties, our football heroes were Johnny Unitas, Raymond Berry and the Baltimore Colts. While we carefully watched each move of these greats on television and copied their style in our backyard play, John was sitting on the Colts' bench and going in the Colts' locker room talking with these heroes. His grandfather was the team physician for the Baltimore Colts.

"John went to Colgate College where he majored in English, and then to Carolina where he got his law degree in 1971. He moved to Raleigh after law school in 1971 with his wife Leslie where he worked for the Department of Insurance for two years, the Attorney General's Office for four years, and then in 1976 John joined me in the practice of law. At these agencies John distinguished himself as an outstanding lawyer and began to earn the respect and admiration that has distinguished his career. He worked in the antitrust section of the AGO, but his most satisfying case was probably the time he defeated the great Senator Sam Ervin in the North Carolina Supreme Court by arguing to the Court an interpretation of an old case that Sam Ervin had written when he was a Justice on the State Supreme Court. It was Ervin's first appearance as a private lawyer in 28 years, and here was this great



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constitutional scholar, who had made such a name for himself in the Watergate hearings, arguing that he ought to know what the Court had in mind when it handed down the case because he had written it! John, however, argued in effect that Ervin's interpretation of the case was dead wrong, and John prevailed.

"In the early years, John's practice was quite diverse but, over the years, has developed into a real estate, administrative law, and transactional practice. He, like a lot of us, has had the good fortune to be able to drop a lot of areas of practice that we would prefer others handle.

"John, his wife, me and my wife have all been good friends almost from the day he moved to Raleigh. His wife is an interior designer (I get these terms confused) with an architecture firm. He has two wonderful daughters, Amy, who works and lives in the Washington, DC area, and Beth, who is a school teacher in Charlotte, North Carolina.

"John has served two terms as a director of the Wake County Bar Association, has served on numerous committees of the Bar (almost without exception rising to chairperson of that committee), was elected President of the Wake County and Tenth Judicial District Bar in 1994, and is currently Chairperson of the Grievance Committee for the Tenth Judicial District. John's entire career has been one of service to the profession and the community, as well as his clients and family.

"His professional commitments are deftly balanced with his commitment to his faith. John has twice served as President of Beth Or Temple, has served on and chaired numerous important committees for his place of worship, and, in keeping with his rock solid personality, attends services almost every week of the year. John's great strength is in his virtues as a lawyer and as a person. If you read the Wake County "Creed of Professionalism" [reprinted after this ar-

ticle in John's honor], it is the story of John's life. I have known many wonderful lawyers in the 33 years that I have been practicing law, but I have never known anyone that even comes close to John in truly exemplifying the consistent qualities of professionalism contained in that Creed. Those who know and have worked with him know that John never seeks to call attention to himself, and he never seeks to take credit for anything. Yet, he is probably the most effective leader in the Bar. If there is an important job to do or decision to make, put John in charge and it will be done – with maximum participation and wisdom. If you really want to know John's strength, read that Creed carefully and imagine someone who day in and day out lives and practices those virtues without compromise. He is a terrific, well-prepared lawyer. Everyone knows that, when John says something, it's time to listen.

"When John found out he was receiving the Joseph Branch Professionalism Award, the first thing he said to me was that he was sorry that I would have to give a speech. Hopefully, he was referring to the extra burden, rather than the quality of my speech making. ...

"John infuses his life with activity and the joys of fatherhood. He is an exercise nut, having spent at least three to four mornings a week at the YMCA all through his adult life. He is also a soccer enthusiast who watched, then coached, his girls, one of whom played on the championship Broughton High School team. After that, John started watching again. With the demise of Colgate as a sports powerhouse, John became a big Carolina fan.

"John holds the basic tenets of his career as close to him as he does the tenets of his faith and his passion for sports. He ensures that he is daily reminded of these basic

tenets by placing them in front of him as he goes about his daily work, as you will find most extraordinary professionals will do. On his office wall John has two quotes which serve this purpose for him: "Justice shall thou pursue" from the Bible, and "Justice is Truth in Action."

"The best quote to describe John's office, however, is [I paraphrase] "those that keep an uncluttered desk will never know the joy of finding something thought lost forever" [or words to that effect].

"John has been a wonderful mentor figure and friend to my son, Keith – who is our partner in the law firm, as he is a mentor and friend to many young lawyers. As his partner and his friend, I am proud to introduce you to the best lawyer I know, John Silverstein."

Congratulations to our 2002 Joseph Branch Professional Award winner, John M. Silverstein.

In honor of John Silverstein, we reprint the WCBA Creed of Professionalism. (Please see next page.)

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