

OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE SARASOTA COUNTY BAR ASSOCIATION

THE DOCKET



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CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF SCBA:

2026

A CENTURY OF SERVING
SARASOTA'S LEGAL COMMUNITY

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HOW AI AND THE NEW RULES ARE
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100 Years of SCBA:

Honoring Our Past, Shaping Our Future



SCBA PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

By: Sara Castro, Esq. | Castro Potts Law Firm PLLC



In January 2026, the Sarasota County Bar Association will celebrate an extraordinary milestone — 100 years of service to our legal community.

Founded in 1926, the SCBA began as a small group of attorneys committed to professionalism, collegiality, and the shared responsibility of strengthening the administration of justice in Sarasota County. One hundred years later, those same principles continue to guide us.

When SCBA was founded in 1926, Sarasota County itself was still young — shaped by land booms, rail expansion, and a rapidly growing population drawn to Florida's Gulf Coast. The local courts operated in a far different world before air conditioning, electronic research, or modern discovery rules. Yet even then, the courts served as one of the county's most stable civic institutions — a place where disputes were resolved, certain rights were protected, and the rule of law took root alongside the community itself. Over the decades, Sarasota's legal system has reflected the broader history of Florida and the nation — from the Great Depression and World War II, through civil rights reform, population growth, and the modernization of the judiciary. Courthouses changed locations and designs, procedural rules evolved, and the practice of law became increasingly specialized. Through all of it, local lawyers played a central role not only as advocates, but as civic leaders helping guide Sarasota County through periods of transformation and growth.

Over the past century, generations of lawyers and judges have volunteered their time, shared their expertise, mentored young attorneys, and worked together — sometimes as adversaries in the courtroom, but always as colleagues within this Association. Our past presidents, board members, section leaders,

and committee volunteers built a foundation that allows SCBA to thrive and continue to evolve today.

The opening of the new South County Courthouse reflects Sarasota County's continued investment in a modern, accessible judicial system designed to serve a growing community while preserving the dignity and efficiency of the courts. At the same time, SCBA remains focused on the future of the profession itself — including emerging legal and ethical issues surrounding artificial intelligence — a theme that will take center stage at the 2026 Bench-Bar Conference as lawyers and judges come together to examine how technology is reshaping the practice of law.

As we reflect on this centennial moment, it is also worth recognizing the role of dedicated staff in sustaining that legacy. One fun fact that underscores this continuity: the Association's current Executive Director, Holly Lipps, was preceded by her mother, Jan Jung, who served in that role for 27 years. Together, their leadership represents nearly four decades of service — a rare and meaningful example of institutional stewardship within a voluntary bar association.

As we look ahead, it is important to remember that SCBA has never been static. The practice of law has changed dramatically since 1926, and our Association has evolved alongside it, expanding educational opportunities, strengthening community outreach, supporting diversity and inclusion, and creating meaningful connections across practice areas and generations.

What has remained constant is the value of **community**. In a profession that can often feel isolated, SCBA continues to serve as a place where lawyers come together — to learn, to lead, and to support one another.

As we enter our centennial year, I invite you to celebrate with us. Throughout 2026, we will honor our history while looking ahead to the future of our profession and our Association. Whether you are a long-time member or new to SCBA, you are part of this story and part of what will carry us into our second century.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to the Sarasota County Bar Association over the past 100 years. I am proud to serve as President during this historic year and look forward to celebrating it with all of you.

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The Community Foundation of Sarasota County is proud to partner with the Sarasota County Bar Association to support the Booker High School Law Academy in providing students with a rigorous academic program in conjunction with course work in Law Studies and Criminal Justice. The Sarasota County Bar Association provides students with curriculum materials, real-world experiences and expertise.



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Looking Forward to the New Year



YLD PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

By: Jill Bowen, Esq. | Berlin Patten Ebling, PLLC

As we step into 2026, I find myself reflecting on what a wonderfully full and memorable year we've had together in the Young Lawyers Division. It was a year marked by new energy, familiar traditions, renewed connections, and (at least in my house) far too many runny noses. But despite the sniffles and a calendar that seemed to refill itself faster than I could clear it, this past year has filled me with gratitude for our incredible YLD community and excitement for everything still ahead.

One of the highlights of 2025 was beginning the long-awaited revival of Second Thursdays. After a few transitional years when our routines shifted and reshaped, bringing this tradition back felt like reconnecting with an old friend. Watching familiar faces—and plenty of new ones—gather each month reminded me just how important it is for young lawyers to have space to decompress, share ideas, and build real relationships outside the courtroom and conference room. Each Second Thursday felt like a small victory in rebuilding the sense of community that makes our division truly special.

We capped the year with an especially joyful moment, our joint SCBA Holiday Party with Sarasota FAWL on December 11 at Marina Jack. It was a festive night full of laughter, conversation, and a well-deserved opportunity to celebrate the season together. Events like this don't magically appear, and I want to give a heartfelt thank-you to the planning committee—Meghan O'Connell, Danielle Hixon, Kate Craig, Amanda Davy, Emily Flinchpaugh, Andrew Clark, Cathi Carson-Freyman, and Marisa Agganis—for the creativity, patience, and hours of planning they put into making the evening such a success. Their hard work showed in every detail, and the night was a per-

fect reflection of what collaborative volunteer leadership can accomplish.

And now, here we are, turning the page to a brand-new year, one that's already shaping up to be full of opportunities and momentum. In 2026, we're excited to continue building on what we revived this past year. Second Thursdays will carry forward, giving us all something to look forward to each month. Our first major event of the year, Bagels with the Bench, is scheduled for January 22 at the Silvertooth Judicial Center, and I can't think of a better way to kick off the professional side of the new year. This event offers young lawyers a rare and meaningful chance to connect with members of the judiciary in a relaxed, conversational setting (plus, who doesn't love a good bagel?). I hope many of you will join us for what has become one of YLD's most enriching traditions.

Not long after that, we'll shift gears into one of our biggest annual projects: the Mock Trial Competition on Saturday, February 28. This event is not only a favorite among our members, but also a service to students in our community who are exploring advocacy skills and discovering what it means to be part of the legal profession. Their enthusiasm is contagious and watching them bring a case to life is always inspiring. But to make the competition possible, we need volunteers. Judges, scorers, timekeepers, and general helpers all play a crucial role, and I encourage anyone with a few hours to spare to get involved. It's rewarding, it's fun, and it's one of the best ways to give back to the next generation of lawyers. If you are interested in volunteering, please reach out to me or Cori Coser, and we will get you signed up!

Of course, behind the scenes of all these events is

the quieter rhythm of our professional and personal lives—the many meetings, planning sessions, deadlines, and challenges that fill a young lawyer’s day. For me, 2025 included what felt like dozens upon dozens of meetings and closings, each one somehow sandwiched between daycare drop-offs, trying to find time to eat, and wiping yet another runny little nose (or two). Parenthood has a funny way of turning your to-do list into a puzzle and your immune system into a crash-course instructor.

But the year also brought lots of sunshine. Amid the appointments and committee calls, there were boat days with friends, peaceful moments by the water, and afternoons at the park chasing my little ones as they discovered new ways to climb, jump, and demand snacks. Those moments were the exclamation points in my year, and they remind me how important it is to find joy in the tiny, unexpected corners of our busy lives.

As I look ahead, I’m optimistic not only about our events and programs, but about the spirit of the YLD itself. Our division is made up of people who genuinely support one another, who step up to volunteer, who show up to connect, and who make space in their already-packed schedules to ensure the organization continues to thrive. That collective effort is what makes the YLD such a meaningful community, and I’m honored to serve as President during this exciting time.

Thank you all for a great year, for your commitment to each other, and for the energy you bring to our profession. Here’s to more connection, more collaboration, more Second Thursdays, and many moments to celebrate in 2026. Happy New Year!

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Law for Non-Lawyers?

AI isn't a JD



SCD PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

By: Mark Creech, Esq. | The Law Offices of Mark A. Creech, PLLC & Elizabeth Stamoulis, Esq. | Williams Parker

You've probably heard about the exciting possibilities that artificial intelligence ("AI") offers for the legal profession: faster document review, improved research capabilities, and tools that can streamline repetitive tasks. These advancements have the potential to reduce costs, increase efficiency, and enable attorneys to focus on higher-value work, such as strategy and client counseling.

While AI offers incredible potential, it also introduces new risks and responsibilities. For example, you've probably already heard about lawyers getting into trouble for relying too heavily on AI—particularly when it comes to "hallucinations," or instances where AI generates information that looks convincing but is fabricated.

But beyond the sensational headlines, AI is also quietly reshaping the day-to-day practice of law in other, unexpected ways. One shift we're seeing is that, just as AI tools are making it easier for lawyers to practice, they are also making it easier for individuals to attempt legal tasks on their own. Generative AI platforms can draft letters and pleadings in seconds, giving people a sense of confidence that they can "DIY" their legal matters without professional help.

Unfortunately, this confidence is often misplaced. Many of these AI-generated documents include brackets that the user may not realize should be completed before the document is sent. For example, we have seen letters arrive with "[Insert Name Here]" or "[Describe Issue]" still in the text. This is a clear sign that the sender used AI to generate the letter, and worse, didn't even bother to review it before sending.

Even when the placeholders are filled in, the content may not comply with local laws or procedural rules. Also, AI tools do not replace the judgment and experience of a trained attorney. This results in documents that appear polished but are legally deficient, leading to frustration and delays for all parties.

For lawyers, this trend means spending more time correcting errors or dealing with opposing parties who are not equipped to represent themselves. It also raises ethical questions: how should we advise clients who have already acted on faulty AI guidance? The line between offering helpful corrections and assuming responsibility for flawed work is becoming increasingly blurred.

A second side effect of AI is subtler but equally im-

pactful: clients are using AI to generate lists of questions and requests and even to draft legal documents for review. This might seem helpful; however, these AI-generated materials often create more work than they save. For example, I am aware of one instance in which a client asked the AI to create a summary of a 10-page agreement for an attorney to review. The summary that the AI created was also 10 pages, and so the attorney's review time actually went up rather than down because of the client's use of AI. Also, AI doesn't always understand relevance or priority. A client may ask AI to generate a list of questions for a lawyer to answer that may be duplicative, irrelevant, or based on incorrect assumptions.

This is changing the dynamics of the attorney-client relationship. Instead of starting with a clean slate, lawyers must now grapple with clients' preconceived notions and explain why AI-generated information may not be appropriate or accurate. AI also introduces a new layer of expectation: clients may assume that, because AI produces work quickly and cheaply, lawyers should be able to do the same. Managing these expectations requires clear communication about the value of professional judgment and the limitations of technology.

What does this all mean for the future of legal practice? We must remember that AI is not a substitute for legal knowledge or experience; it's a tool. As with any tool, its value depends on the user's skill. This means education. Attorneys need to understand how these tools work, where they fall short, and how to integrate them responsibly into our workflows. We also need to educate our clients on the same topics. When individuals attempt to represent themselves using AI, we can provide guidance on potential pitfalls and encourage them to seek professional help before issues escalate.

AI is here to stay, and its influence will only grow. As attorneys, we have a choice: resist change or embrace it strategically. By educating ourselves about the limitations of AI and being intentional and thoughtful about how we integrate it into our practices, we can improve efficiency without sacrificing quality. The ones who do this most successfully will be those who adopt this technological innovation while preserving the irreplaceable value of human judgment and care.



Partners Damian Mallard and Alan Perez are both Board Certified in Civil Trial Law. This certification, granted by The Florida Bar, recognizes attorneys who have demonstrated the highest level of skill, professionalism, and ethical standards in the courtroom.

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CDI CHAIR'S COLUMN

By: Tonya Willis Pitts, Esq. | Pitts Law Firm

As the legal community welcomes a new year, the Sarasota County Bar Association is reminded that one of the most meaningful investments we can make to our community is in the next generation of lawyers. Nowhere is that opportunity more evident than at Booker High School's Law Academy, a program dedicated to introducing students to the fundamentals of law, civics, and justice with emphasis on careers in law.

The Law Academy gives high school students a unique head start with coursework in legal studies, mock trials, and exposure to the American legal process, all

tion policies. Ramos built on this interest by breaking down key legal concepts, explaining how policies are created and enforced, and sharing real-world examples from his practice. His clear explanations helped students understand how immigration issues directly affect families, communities, and the justice system, making a complex subject more understandable and relevant to the students.

Ramos' visit deepened the students' interest in civic and government engagement and inspired many to consider careers in law, public policy, and community advocacy. His approachable style and willingness



designed to help them envision themselves as future attorneys, paralegals, judges, law enforcement officers, etc. Yet, what truly brings the curriculum to life is the participation of local lawyers and judges who volunteer their time as mentors and guest speakers. Their presence offers something no textbook can, which is authentic insight into what it means to work in the legal system with professionalism and purpose.

Recently, Jason Ramos, an experienced immigration attorney with nearly twenty years of practice and eight years of service in the U.S. Army Reserve, delivered an engaging and timely presentation to students at the Law Academy. His lecture on October 31, 2025, came at a moment when many students were already curious about immigration law due to recent changes and ongoing debates over U.S. immigra-

to answer difficult questions encouraged thoughtful discussion and critical thinking about fairness, due process, and the human impact of legal decisions. In fact, Ramos described the experience as both meaningful and timely. "It gave me the opportunity to engage with high school students on a high-profile issue of the day, that is, immigration in America. And to cast some light on it," he noted, emphasizing the widespread misinformation and confusion in our community about "why immigrants are here, what rights do they have, what benefits they can obtain, and what the government must do before it can remove a noncitizen from the United States."

When asked if he left the experience with any positive impressions, Ramos replied, "I did. I was impressed by the fact that there were students at the high school

level who already had a deep interest in the subject of law. I was also impressed by some of the questions that the students posed. Those questions appeared to be prompted by their life experience, where some of students may have seen their family members or loved ones face an immigration-related legal issue.” He also expressed a strong willingness to return. His initial presentation offered a broad overview of the immigration system, but time constraints prevented a deeper dive. “Given the opportunity, I most certainly would speak again,” Ramos said. “In a future presentation, I will focus on a single area of this vast, complex, and always-changing area of law.” Ramos’ experience highlights the meaningful role local attorneys can play in educating and inspiring the next generation; one classroom visit at a time. He left with a renewed enthusiasm for his work and the satisfaction of helping shape the next generation of informed, civic-minded leaders.

When attorneys share their own journeys, such as why they chose the law, the challenges they have faced, and the rewards of serving clients and the community, it can be transformative for a young student. A single classroom visit or courthouse tour can spark curiosity, confidence, and a sense of belonging in a profession that can often feel distant or exclusive. For many students, hearing directly from a lawyer or judge makes the possibility of a legal career real for the first time.

These interactions also strengthen the bridge between the Sarasota legal community and our local schools. Every volunteer hour spent mentoring or speaking at Booker’s Law Academy helps cultivate diversity and inclusion within the profession, which are values that the Sarasota County Bar Association and its Council for Diversity and Inclusion continue to champion. Mentorship not only opens doors for students; it also reinforces the profession’s commitment to fairness, civic responsibility, and public service. These benefits also extend to the mentors themselves. Attorneys often describe their time with Booker students as “reinvigorating,” because it serves as a reminder of why they entered the field in the first place. Guest speaking and mentorship are also excellent opportunities for professional development, offering a chance to practice communication, leadership, and community engagement outside the courtroom.

As we begin 2026, the SCBA encourages members to get involved with Booker High School’s Law Academy. Members can participate in various ways, such as volunteering to speak to a class about your area of practice, host students for law office or courthouse tours, or participate in mock trial preparation. Judges are especially encouraged to lend their voices and perspectives, as their experiences provide invaluable lessons in ethics, procedure, and the real-world impact of the rule of law.

By sharing our time and knowledge, we can help ensure that Sarasota’s next generation of legal professionals is inspired, informed, and empowered. Mentorship is more than outreach; it is legacy building. And in a community as vibrant as ours, that legacy begins with showing up for the students who may one day follow in our footsteps. If you are interested in speaking to students at the Law Academy or volunteering at the program, please contact Shelli Freeland Eddie at freelandeddielaw@gmail.com and Holly Lipps at holly@sarasotabar.com.

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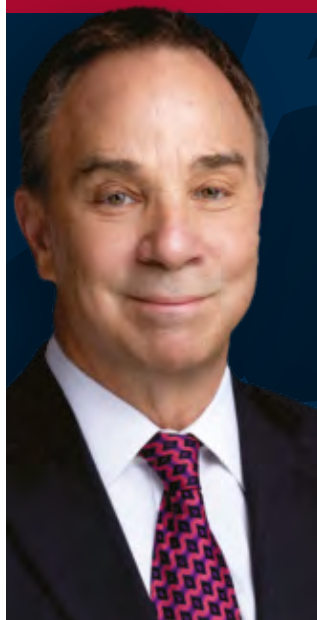


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New Year's Resolutions

Sarasota Style



By: *Barbara Bush, Esq. | Barbara D. Bush, PLLC*
SCBA Board of Directors, CDI Council Member

As we head into 2026, I've been thinking about resolutions, but not the ambitious color-coded kind that require flowcharts and spreadsheets. After another year of deadlines, hearings, and Zoom meetings, I'm more interested in simple ways to enjoy the place we live. Because Sarasota is home, not just the place we describe vaguely to out-of-state counsel as "somewhere on the Gulf." It's where we spend our days, raise our families, and decompress.

For years, I worked in an office with a fantastic water view. Clients would walk in, stop mid-sentence, and say, "I can't believe you get to look at this all day." Meanwhile, I hadn't looked out the window since Monday!

So, this year, instead of aspiring to lose weight, manage my time more efficiently, or get more clients, I'm keeping it practical. Here are the five things I'm committing to, and maybe you'll join me:

1. Start the day slowly.

Wake up a little earlier than the kids if you need to. There's something special about having a quiet moment to yourself to reflect, pray, stretch, or just enjoy a warm cup of coffee while you scroll. Even better if you can get your body moving, whether it's a peaceful spin around the neighborhood on the golf cart, or dipping your toes in the water first thing in the morning. Little rituals like these truly set the tone for the rest of the day. And if you're heading out, grab a latte from a local favorite like Project Coffee, ofKors Bakery, or O&A Coffee. Starting your morning with a bit of calm and a good Sarasota brew can make the whole day feel lighter.

2. Take a REAL lunch break.

This isn't radical. It's actually very basic, but in our profession, it somehow feels revolutionary. Step out of the office and eat something that didn't come from a courthouse vending machine or show up on a paper plate during a deposition. Treat yourself to real food from a local spot. Boca, So Fresh, and Circo are my go-tos downtown. Or grab something quick and take a stroll through Payne Park, or sit on a bench at Marina Jack to watch the water and soak in a little vitamin D. A real lunch break isn't about indulgence; it's about preserving your sanity.

3. Catch one sunset a week.

This may be the most achievable resolution on earth, especially here. Our sunsets are truly award-winning. Choose your favorite spot: Lido for a quiet stroll, Siesta

for soft sand and a lively crowd, Bayfront Park if you're already downtown, or the Ringling Bridge if you want both views and cardio. And if you're south of the county line at rush hour, Nokomis or Venice Beach are perfect alternatives. The whole experience takes about fifteen minutes, and honestly, it's more effective than most meditation apps. There's something grounding about watching the day wrap itself up.

4. Choose community over isolation.

The practice of law can feel isolating, even when your calendar is full and you've spent the entire day talking. It's easy to go weeks without seeing colleagues anywhere except a Zoom box or a courtroom hallway while everyone rushes to the next thing.

This year, I challenge you to go to one SCBA event you skipped last year. Meet a colleague for coffee instead of exchanging endless "We should catch up!" emails. Take a CLE in person, not because you need the credits, but because talking shop with real people beats half-listening to a webinar at 1.5x speed while drafting an email. Some of the best parts of this profession come from the people who understand it, who've lived through the same case management orders, the same late-night prep sessions, the same surprising rulings. I've been lucky to meet mentors who became friends, and colleagues who became sounding boards. Those relationships didn't happen accidentally; they happened because someone decided to show up.

5. Explore one new local spot each month.

Sarasota County has so much more to offer than the three routes between home, the office, and the courthouse. Try exploring a new trail: Red Bug Slough for a quiet walk, Rothenbach if you like something more structured, Oscar Scherer for real Florida terrain, or The Bay Park for easy, breezy waterfront paths. And maybe stop at that restaurant you've driven past a hundred times: Indigenous, Shore, Veronica, Owen's Fish Camp, C'est La Vie!, Brine, any of the local gems that never make the tourist lists but absolutely should. Visit a different farmers market; my favorites are Lakewood Ranch and downtown Sarasota. Check out Selby Gardens' nighttime exhibits. Wander through a local bookstore instead of hitting "add to cart." It's amazing how refreshing it feels to rediscover your own backyard.

Here's to a year of working hard, breathing a little more, and remembering that practicing law in Sarasota has its perks.

Happy New Year, SCBA. See you around town.

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Looking Back on Years Past with the SCBA



By: Nick Roknich, Esq. | Roknich Law Firm
SCD and YLD Board of Directors

As we enter a new year and look forward to the events ahead, I find myself reflecting on the many meaningful experiences I've had with the Sarasota County Bar Association. I'm truly grateful for the community the SCBA fosters and for the support it provides to its members.

I was licensed as a new lawyer in April 2021 by the Honorable Judge Charles Sniffen at the historic courthouse in Bradenton. At the time, most of the cases my father and I handled were in Manatee County. My parents and I lived there as well, and although our office was in Downtown Sarasota, I had very little personal connection to Sarasota County.

When I first started practicing, I was hesitant to get involved with the local bar. Coming from law school in Chicago, where the stereotype of the "difficult big-city lawyer" was alive and well, I wasn't eager to immerse myself in another unfamiliar legal culture. I barely knew anyone beyond the few judges assigned to my Manatee County cases. Everything felt new, unfamiliar, and to be honest, intimidating. And while some who know me now may find this surprising, I was quite timid and shy during those early months. The first two or three years of my career were spent mostly in the office, wanting deeper professional connections but unsure of how to take the leap.

Once I found my footing in Sarasota, everything changed. I quickly came out of my shell and dove into SCBA activities. Within my first year, I attended nearly every event, regardless of whether it related to my practice area, and was elected to the Young Lawyers Division Board. By the end of my second year, I had also been elected to the South County Division Board.

Today, I am co-chair of the SCD's Sporting Clays event and help plan and sponsor the SCBA's popular Spring Training Baseball event at Ed Smith Stadium.

Along the way, I've met many lawyers I now proudly call friends. I know I can rely on them for guidance as I encounter new legal issues, and the sense of community has been invaluable. The SCBA has become a foundation of support, offering both professional development and social connection. I'm grateful that I stepped outside my comfort zone and became as involved as I have.

My firm and I are now firmly rooted in Sarasota County. We maintain our office in Downtown Sarasota and have added a second location in Venice. My parents live in Sarasota County, and I live in North Port. In every way, we are now "Sarasota." Being an active SCBA member feels like a natural and important part of that identity. I honestly can't imagine what my professional or personal life would look like had I not joined.

The past few years as an SCBA member have been a source of tremendous fulfillment. The local legal community has proven to be warm, welcoming, and supportive, quite different from the environment I experienced in Chicago. The lawyers and judges here are genuine, collaborative, and eager to build meaningful relationships.

As I look back on the experiences and friendships I've gained through the SCBA, I'm filled with appreciation. And as we begin another year, I look forward to many more opportunities for connection, growth, and camaraderie with this incredible community.



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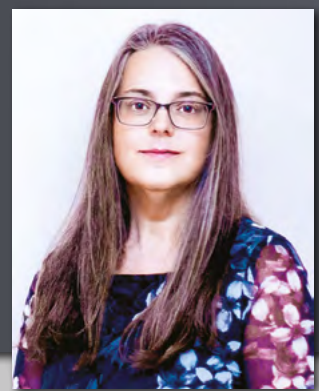
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Why You Should Say Yes to the SCBA YLD



By: Forest Sutton, Esq. | Syrett Meshad, P.A.
YLD Board of Directors

There are two types of new lawyers: those who pretend they know what they're doing... and those who admit they don't. When I started my career as a prosecutor, I was definitely in the first category. My earliest days in the courtroom felt like someone had tossed me the keys to a moving car and said, "Good luck." One moment I was swearing in an officer, the next I was arguing a motion to suppress something I hadn't even researched yet. It was trial by fire from the very beginning.

A strong mentor could have cut my learning curve in half.

For the first seven months of practice, I stumbled through without a roadmap and without any real connection to the larger legal community. I wasn't involved in the Sarasota County Bar, didn't know what events were happening, and rarely met attorneys outside the courthouse. I assumed that figuring everything out on my own was some sort of rite of passage.

It's not. And that's exactly why the Sarasota County Bar's Young Lawyers Division exists.

Solving Professional Isolation

Our profession often expects young lawyers to perform before they've even had a chance to breathe. Government attorneys juggle nonstop hearings and overwhelming caseloads. Private attorneys adjust to billable hour demands and high client expectations. Many new lawyers end up isolated, overwhelmed, and unsure where to turn for support.

And yet, many don't make meaningful professional connections until much later in their careers—missing out on years of growth, guidance, and opportunity.

The SCBA established the YLD to give young lawyers

the community, mentorship, and social connection they need to thrive. We are open to all young attorneys: prosecutors, public defenders, agency lawyers, private practitioners—everyone. Having worked in both government and private practice, I can say firsthand that both worlds benefit from each other.

Mentorship That Actually Means Something

Whether you're navigating your first deposition, figuring out courtroom dynamics, learning to manage your workload, switching practice areas, or dealing with the emotional weight of the job, someone in the YLD has already walked that path.

One of our most meaningful mentorship opportunities comes from our events with judges. Programs like Bagels with the Bench (coming up on January 22) give young lawyers a low-pressure environment to ask honest questions and connect with members of the judiciary as human beings—not just as the ones ruling on their objections.

Socialization: Because You Deserve to Have Fun, Too

Let's be honest: law can be monotonous. Even in government work, where chaos is the routine, the grind can wear you down. Private practice brings its own rhythms of emails, meetings, and drafting that can leave you feeling disconnected.

That's why our social events matter.

Our annual Baseball Outing is a favorite. It's an evening where you can forget about case numbers, chow down on ballpark food, and where you might actually enjoy being around other lawyers.

Then there are our Second Thursday Happy Hours (the next one is actually a Third Thursday!), which re-

liably break up the month and create opportunities to form friendships that make the profession feel less heavy and more human.

Referrals & Professional Growth

Even if you're not job hunting (and hopefully you aren't), building relationships now is an investment in your future self. The right connection can lead to:

- A referral source
- A future colleague
- A career pivot when you need it
- Mentors
- A sounding board for complex issues
-

Many young lawyers don't realize how important this network is until they suddenly need it—and then wish they had started sooner.

Uplifting the Next Generation

One of the most rewarding parts of YLD involvement is giving back. Our annual Mock Trial Competition offers high school students a hands-on introduction to the legal system. They learn advocacy skills, critical thinking, confidence—and in many cases, they meet their first lawyer role models.

It shapes the future of our profession and creates positive early interactions with the justice system.

For volunteers, it's grounding. Stepping back from your own caseload to invest in students reminds you why you went to law school in the first place.

Why You Belong Here

I'm not encouraging you to join simply because I'm the YLD Membership Co-Chair (though my committee would be thrilled). I'm encouraging you because I've lived the difference between being disconnected and being part of a community.

My first year, I wasn't involved, and it showed. I didn't know what was happening locally, didn't know the judges well, and didn't feel connected to the broader bar. That changed the moment I stepped into YLD.

Whether you're a prosecutor in trial every morning, a new associate learning the ropes, a public defender juggling impossible caseloads, or a private practitioner building your book of business, the YLD has something for you:

Connection. Mentorship. Support. Opportunities. Everything most of us wish we had when we first stumbled into practice.

Hope to see you at the next gathering!

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A Meandering Discussion of Passive-Aggression in Legal Practice



By: Jay Frank Castle, Esq. | Level Mediation LLC
SCBA Board of Directors

If the practice of law is a language, then passive-aggression (PA) is its obscure regional dialect — rarely taught, widely spoken, and usually indecipherable to outsiders.

Most young lawyers learn to recognize PA the way we learn to recognize poisonous plants: after a few episodes of unexpected inadvertent contact followed by painful oozing rashes. Yet we cannot simply spray Roundup on our colleagues and expect them to wither up and disappear.

In the spirit of the New Year, new beginnings, peace on earth, and goodwill to mankind, here are a few examples of PA that I have experienced along with some suggestions for handling them (short of drafting a motion to compel basic civility to be filed with the Court of Common Decency).

“Per My Last Email...”

Every one of us has read these words — the ones that suggest not only did you fail to read the previous communication, but perhaps you also failed to complete elementary school. “Per my last email” often translates to: “I’m pretending to sound polite while implying you should try harder at life.”

How to address it:

Resist the urge to respond with “As previously stated on page 3 of my meticulously drafted brain....” Instead, reply with a short, clear update and a hint of graciousness. Something like: “Thanks for the clarification — here’s where things stand.” The key is to break the cycle, not escalate it. Bonus: if anyone else bothers to read this dialogue (like a Circuit Court judge or a confused & frustrated client), you look like the grown-up in the room.

The Magical Shapeshifting Deadline

Ah, the moving target deadline. It starts firm, then becomes flexible, then becomes so malleable you wonder whether it ever existed outside your colleague’s

vivid imagination. The shapeshifting is often accompanied by vague references to “internal client discussions” or “unexpected scheduling complications,” or my personal favorite, “extenuating circumstances beyond our control.”

How to address it:

Document politely. “Happy to accommodate — can you confirm the new deadline in writing, so we stay aligned?” This signals you’re cooperative but not gullible. Most schedules behave better once they’ve been memorialized.

The Anti-Compliment

Just a few examples:

“Interesting argument you made at the hearing. Very... creative.”

Translation: I don’t really understand this stuff - but in the event I later determine you were correct, I guess I will have to concoct a scathing critique for my reply brief.

“You made quite an impression with the jury pool.”

Translation: When are they starting your commitment proceedings? And that tie? Eeesh...

“Well, bless your heart...” (especially popular in North Florida/South Georgia)

Translation: I doubt it is possible for you to be any dumber.

How to address it:

Smile, thank them, and move on. Not every backhanded compliment deserves a return volley.

The Meeting That Should Have Been an Email

Colleagues who schedule a 30-minute Zoom call to



Troy practiced for 37 years as a civil trial litigator and now has a statewide solo mediation practice. He is authorized to mediate in all State Circuit Courts and in the Middle and Northern Federal District Courts.

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- 31-year Florida Bar Board Certified Civil Trial Lawyer
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- Named by Best Lawyers as one of two Tampa “Lawyers of the Year” – Personal Injury Litigation (2014) and Medical Malpractice (2015 and 2023); and recently named as one of two St. Petersburg “Lawyers of the Year” – Personal Injury Litigation and Medical Malpractice
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deliver a message that could fit comfortably inside a fortune cookie are not necessarily malicious — but the effect is the same.

How to address it:

Set agendas in advance. “Happy to meet — what topics should we cover?” This gently pressures the other party to get to the point. If you still find you must agree to a meeting and it then starts to drift, you can steer it back to the agreed agenda like a veteran Navy captain navigating the USS Don't Waste My Time through the Sea of Pointless Chitchat.

Parting Thoughts

Passive aggressive behaviors may sometimes cause us to question the collective emotional maturity of our profession but fear not – I bring you good tidings of great joy.

I have found that most attorneys, beneath the layers of ego, formality, and deadline-induced frazzle, are actually trying their best. Sometimes we just forget how to play nice.

While we cannot change our colleagues, we can change our response to PA. When we respond with patience, professionalism, and perhaps a touch of good-natured humor, we not only defuse the moment — we remind ourselves that the practice of law, like life, is far more fulfilling when we choose grace over grumbling.



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IN MEMORIAM



Judge Robert B. Bennett, Jr. | 1945 - 2025

The Honorable Robert B. Bennett, Jr., affectionately known as “Bob,” passed away on December 11, 2025, in Nokomis, Florida, at the age of 80. A long-time resident of Nokomis, Judge Bennett leaves behind a legacy of service, integrity, and dedication to the law.

Born on September 21, 1945, in Indiana, Bob’s early years were shaped by a move to Louisiana, where his father served as warden of Angola State Prison. In the mid-1960s, the Bennett family relocated to Sarasota, Florida—a place that would become central to Bob’s personal and professional life.

After graduating from the University of South Florida, Bob initially considered a career in education. However, a chance encounter with Helena “Sally” Huston—who would later become his wife—led him down a different path. Inspired by her and drawn to the legal field, Bob enrolled at Florida State University College of Law in 1969 and earned his Juris Doctorate in 1972.

For the next two decades, Bob practiced law in Sarasota, working both in private practice and with the Florida State Attorney’s Office. In 1992, his distinguished legal career reached a new height when Governor Lawton Chiles appointed him to the bench as a judge for Florida’s 12th Judicial Circuit. He served with honor for eighteen years and was elected Chief Judge from 2003 to 2006. Upon his retirement in 2010, the Sarasota County Bar Association filed a motion urging him not to leave—a rare and heartfelt tribute reflecting the deep respect he commanded among his peers. He continued serving as a senior judge until 2017.

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Williams Parker, Sarasota’s largest law firm, is pleased to announce the addition of **Carson L. Oakley** to the firm’s Litigation practice as an associate. Carson represents clients in complex commercial, healthcare, and litigation disputes, earning recognition for her thoughtful approach and results-driven counsel in high-stakes matters.

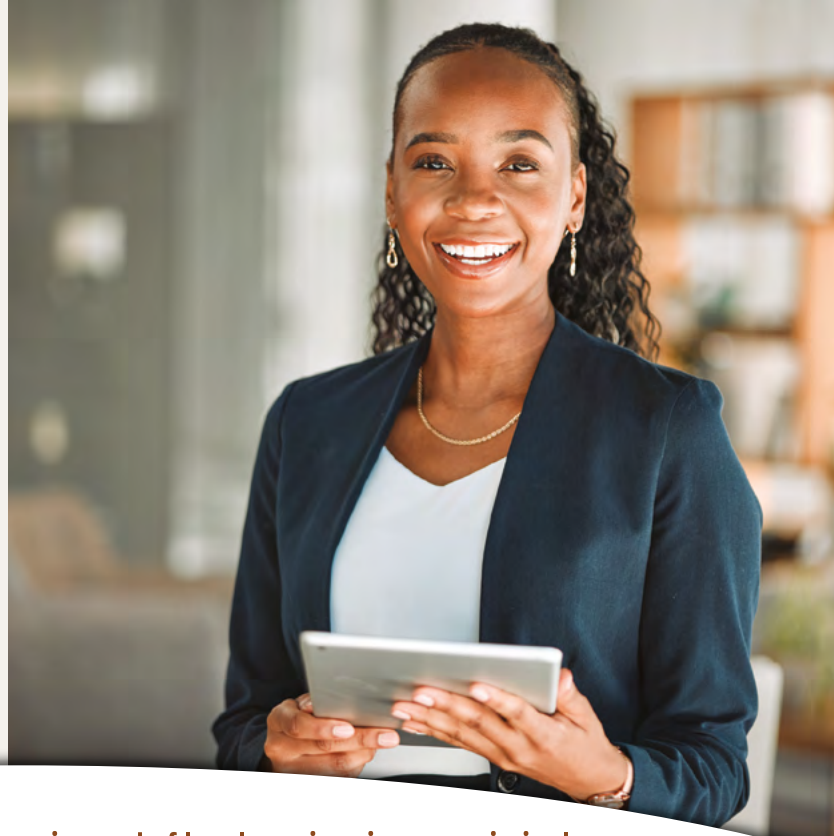


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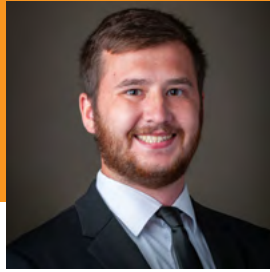
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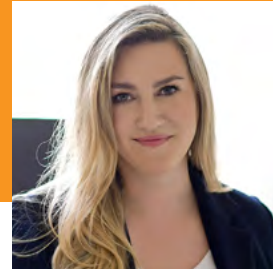
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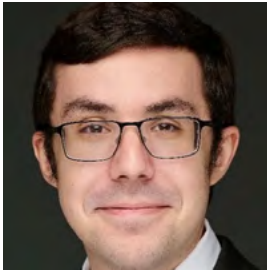
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EVENT SCHEDULE

JANUARY 2026

THURS 22 **Bagels with the Bench** 8:00 AM

FEBRUARY 2026

FRI 06 **Horse Jumping Under the Stars** 6:30 PM

THURS 19 **General Member Meeting** 11:30 AM

FRI 27 **15th Annual Skip Berg Sporting Clays Event** 11:30 AM

MARCH 2026

WED 04 **Salt Cave Spa Sober Social** 6:30 PM

FRI 20 **Spring Training Baseball Outing** 5:30 PM

APRIL 2026

SAT 18 **The Big Splash Bash** 5:30 PM

WED 22 **Administrative Professionals' Day Trivia Lunch** 11:30 AM

MAY 2026

FRI 08 **2026 12th Judicial Circuit Bench Bar Conference** 9:00 AM

JUNE 2026

WED 03 **SCBA Annual Meeting** 11:30 AM

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