

Bridges

In December, 84 years ago, a bridge was being built.

The Golden Gate Bridge and Highway District completed hiring workers who would construct an engineering wonder to cross the mile-wide pelagic barrier between San Francisco and points north. But Chief Engineer Joseph B. Strauss' dazzling design calculations were darkened by a single sepulchral one: By then-standard estimation, such a project would exact one life for every million dollars spent. Applying the bridge's budget, 35 Depression-destitute men just hired for the project would perish completing it.

There were millions of cubic feet of material to excavate on land and under water, 1.2 million rivets to set, and cable to spin from wire that could thrice wrap the equator. That was hard enough, but consider the context. Balancing on skinny mist-slick planks, bridgemen hanging that cable leaned 30 degrees into a fierce wind to avoid being swept to their deaths 600 feet below.

Strauss' unprecedented and extravagant solution was to hang an enormous net under the bridge. It saved many lives, but did something else, too.

By the time Strauss' net was deployed, construction was behind schedule. But once in place, the bridgemen finished the cable work four times faster than thought possible, and the Golden Gate Bridge ultimately opened early. Strauss' net trammed fear no less than falls. Knowing it was there, workers focused on the task at hand.

Apparently, if you're building a bridge, you cannot be scared.

This December, another bridge is being built.

Last month, 2,098 women and men learned they "passed the bar," which alludes to crossing a literal barrier—the wooden one in a courtroom separating those engaged in the administration of justice from those who can only observe. One of them, Brenna Buchanan—the daughter of Texas lawyers—immediately posted on Facebook "I PASSED THE BAR. I'M FINALLY A LAWYER" followed by a million-billion exclamation points. Almost instantly it had 400 "likes."

Bridging from observers to participants, Buchanan and her colleagues satisfied all the educational, testing, and character requirements we did. That was hard enough, but consider the context. They accomplished that while leaning into a fierce headwind of rising debt, the skepticism of friends, and sepulchral reports of oversupply, incivility, and dissatisfaction. Still, they focused on the task at hand.

Because if you're building a bridge, you cannot be scared.

Now these new lawyers must make the slippery passage from the study of law to its practice. Some of them need another bridge, and your State Bar is building one.

The Texas Opportunity & Justice Incubator will provide 18 months of office space, practical training, and mentoring for beginning lawyers intent on building their own practices serving moderate- and low-income Texans' unmet legal needs. TOJI, by itself, can equip only a limited number, but we hope it can be duplicated by institutions and associations across the state.

We've hired Anne-Marie Rábago from California Western School of Law as TOJI's director. Ms. Rábago's experience managing a law incubator will help ensure our program's success. We also

launched TOJI's website—txoji.com—and are accepting participant applications online.

DeLaine Ward, executive director of the Austin Bar Association, has generously offered meeting and office space, and more than two dozen volunteers from 20-plus practice areas have stepped forward to help.

Despite all of this support, there are a host of questions, challenges, and risks. Yet your bar stays focused on the task at hand.

Because if you're building a bridge, you cannot be scared.

TOJI is not the only bridge your State Bar has built to prepare the next generation of Texas lawyers.

Transition to Practice is a mentoring program adaptable for bar associations of all sizes. Ten Minute Mentor is a collection of online videos of lawyers offering practical advice on specific legal topics produced by the Texas Young Lawyers Association. And the Pro Bono Texas website is a one-stop-shop for all things pro bono, allowing attorneys to search for mentors, model forms, CLE, and support services.

Mentoring is reflexive for Texas lawyers; thousands build bridges unawares. On dozens of group email lists and social media sites, Texas lawyers freely mentor one another. The most common email hitting my inbox begins "Has anybody had a: case where/client who/situation when/day in which?" Those exchanges are the ultimate in-this-all-together; they make my heart sing.

And so do Buchanan's million-billion exclamation points. In the midst of my next window-onto-hell kind of day, I plan to count every one of them.

While we and our profession experience unprecedented challenges, the lawyers who will succeed us bring two messages by way of their hard work and courage. First, being part of this profession remains worthy of sacrifice and seeking. And second, as they and we cross to the future of the profession, we must focus on the task at hand; we cannot be scared.

In this gift-giving season, it's apt to reflect on gifts already received. Like being a Texas lawyer. And sometimes it takes someone else—like Buchanan and her 2,097 confrères—to remind us of the value of that gift. It's measured in exclamation points. All million-billion of them.

In December, two millennia ago, another bridge was being built.

Later this month, the world's 2.2 billion Christians will celebrate the Incarnation at Bethlehem—the extravagant crossing of the barrier between humankind and the divine that writer Malcolm Muggeridge elegantly termed "a cable-bridge, frail, swaying, but passable" from "black despair ... soaring upwards into the white radiance of God's universal love." In Luke's account, when Zechariah, Mary, and the shepherds each hear the news, they are frightened. So to focus them on the task at hand, the angel enjoins: "Fear not."

Because if you're building a bridge, you cannot be scared.



FRANK STEVENSON

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