

# The Rule of Law: Give Back to the Community

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Middleburg Life

By Leonard Shapiro  
For Middleburg Life

You've heard those never-ending lawyer jokes, especially the genre that begins: "You know you need a new lawyer when you meet him in prison."

Or: "You know you need a new lawyer when he tells you his last case was a Budweiser."

And one more: "You know you need a new lawyer when he picks the jury by playing duck-duck-goose."

But when it comes to one 30-person Northern Virginia firm, McCandlish Lillard, with seven attorneys who all live in and around the Middleburg area, their good work is no laughing matter in this community.

A law practice that started in 1908 is now clearly bucking the national trend of mega-firms with several thousand attorneys on their swollen rosters. And for many of its practitioners, offering their services to all manner of non-profits, school and church groups on a pro bono or vastly reduced fee has been the norm, rather than the exception.

And so, among the Middleburg area contingent, there is Al Croft providing legal services to The Hill School and Middleburg Community Center, serving as a board member and treasurer of the Windy Hill

Foundation and previously advising the Piedmont Community Foundation. There is Stephen C. Price of Philomont, a director at Oatlands, the George Marshall home at Dodona Manor and Mosby Heritage Association as well as general counsel for the Land Trust of Virginia.

Angela Campbell of Aldie is the pro bono legal advisor to John Champe High School's booster club and has led multiple disaster relief missions for Arcola United Methodist Church, including several to the Gulf Coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. And C. Vincent Leon-Guerrero of Upperville actively supports the Mosby Heritage Association, Unison Preservation Society and the Upperville Fire Department.

In other words, it's not only about billable hours for those four and three other locally-based colleagues like Autumn McCullough and Bethany Ingersoll of Middleburg and William Bethune of Lucketts. It's about doing good in the communities where they live.

Al Croft, a Chicago native who has lived in Middleburg since 1973, spent 30 years of mostly commuting into Washington, first as a federal prosecutor, then a litigator for a big D.C. firm. Seven years ago, he joined McCandlish Lillard, a decision he's obviously never regretted.

"I really don't think there's another law



firm that's interested in doing the things in the community like we've done," said Croft, who works out of the firm's Leesburg office. "We look for people who have those same interests and we try to instill in our younger people the same feeling of giving back."

McCandlish Lillard, with its main office in Fairfax, actually had been part of the mega-firm trend of the 1980s when it merged with another big Baltimore practice. But in 1995, several of its original attorneys decided to untie the knot and go back to focusing on its Northern Virginia roots. At the time, the re-constituted firm had 15 lawyers, a number that has doubled since then in a practice that can handle just about anything.

"It's a tried and proven way to practice

law that started with this firm 107 years ago with lawyers who set a certain standard and were active in their community," Croft said. "Now, the firm is perpetuating the same philosophy. A lot of lawyers who have the opportunity to practice in smaller firms hate the whole idea of the big firm. You're a corporation. It's a numbers game. You answer to the management and it's all about the bottom line."

"Our firm now is big enough to handle anything within reason, and we can still pick and choose our clients. There's no hard and fast rule that you have to bill so many hours. Our lawyers can have a life, too."

They also had some fun this past August by sponsoring the first annual Hound Dog Day to raise money for local dog rescue groups. The late Jesse B. Wilson III, a principal in the firm, created Hound Dog Day in the 1990s as a summertime counterpart of Groundhog Day. Wilson's concept: if the hound dog walks across the front porch and stops to drink from his water bowl, summer will continue for six weeks. If not, fall comes early.

The firm celebrated this "holiday" with an annual company-wide cookout. But last year, in keeping with its community service philosophy, it was opened to the public. With sponsorships and the sale of t-shirts, the event raised over \$8,000 for local rescue groups.

And that's no joke, lawyer or otherwise. ■



Courtesy Photo

Attorney Al Croft

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