



“OH, THE PLACES YOU’LL
GO!”



BY REBECCA SCHAFFER, YLD CHAIR

This spring I had the pleasure of speaking at the New Lawyers Program, along with Kentucky Court of Appeals Judge Sara Combs. After Judge Combs finished she sat down next to me and leaned over. “I always get so nervous speaking at these.” I responded, “Me too.” I was surprised to hear this from a highly esteemed appellate judge with 36 years of experience and a tenure on the Kentucky Supreme Court.

Later, I had an opportunity to speak with Judge Combs at greater length. She further explained that she was concerned whether what she had to say was still relevant to young lawyers. It was. The first time I heard Judge Combs speak at the New Lawyers Program was the year I was admitted to practice. Eight incredibly long and incredibly short years go. And what Judge Combs said had the same effect on me eight years later—reminding me how exciting and gratifying it is to be a Kentucky lawyer.

“YOUR LAW DEGREE IS YOUR PASSPORT.”

Judge Combs discussed her very interesting and unique path as a lawyer. After graduating from law school, she practiced with Wyatt, Tarrant & Combs, and then moved on to her role as general counsel for Naegele Outdoor Advertising Company. After her husband of three years, Governor Bert T. Combs, died in a flash flood in 1991, Judge Combs opened a solo practice in Stanton, Ky. She told me that she never dreamed that her decision to stay in Stanton and eke

out a solo practice would lead to a public position. She started from scratch and her first case involved a goat in a cemetery.

In 1993 she became the first woman to serve on the Supreme Court of Kentucky. From 1994 through the present she has served on the Kentucky Court of Appeals, including six years as the Chief Judge—also the first woman to serve in that capacity.

“YOU ARE NOT STUCK.”

Judge Combs was 28 when she decided to go to law school. While contemplating that decision, she lamented the fact that if she did start, she would not graduate until she was 31. However, her father very aptly pointed out to her that in three years she would be 31, whether she went to law school or not.

Regardless of where we happen to be on the road of life, or law, we have choices. Even if we may think we are too old, too young, too inexperienced, too entrenched. Judge Combs reminded the new lawyers that if they do not like what they are doing—they are not stuck. Though the changes made in pursuit of happiness and fulfillment are usually not easy, they will never be regretted. Judge Combs took a leap of faith when she opened her own practice in Stanton. And she has no regrets about doing so. It was a personal choice—not the most secure, not the most logical, and not one based on what everyone thought she should do. Judge Combs reminded us that the profession of law should serve you and your loved ones—not the other way around. She told us that you have

to have faith that if you make the right decisions for the right reasons, it will all work out. “There is a lot of pressure in the profession to put the law ahead of everything else—pressure to believe that is the way to do things. You can leave. You can make personal decisions that are right for you.”

“YOU’VE GOT TO RISK AND RISK GREATLY IF YOU EVER WANT TO AMOUNT TO ANYTHING.”

Judge Combs has loved what she has done and has never been bored. However, it hasn’t always been easy. During law school she attended night classes at University of Louisville and taught French and Spanish in Henryville, Ind., during the day. For 3 ½ years she drove 100 miles a day. Because of the law, she met the love her life, Governor Combs. She talked about how life is like an intricate Aztec mosaic. While we are in the midst of it, or standing up close, we may not see the full picture. However, as time gives us distance and perspective, we are able to see how it all fits together so beautifully.

Former Governor Brereton Jones called Judge Combs in May 1993, and told her there would be a vacancy on the Kentucky Supreme Court. Judge Combs started giving him names of women in Eastern Kentucky she respected and thought would be good candidates. His response, “Well, what’s wrong with you.” Judge Combs had not expected this. She did not know anything about politics and wasn’t confident in her ability to win an election after her term expired. No one knew her; she was just “that woman from Louisville.” Then she remembered what her late husband always said, “You’ve got to risk and risk greatly if you ever want to amount to anything.”

After her appointment she ran for election, and lost. She was disappointed, and was surprised when Governor Jones called her to congratulate her. “But I lost,” she told him. He responded, “Not nearly as much as we all thought you would.” When an opening came up for the Kentucky Court of Appeals, Judge Combs initially said no thanks, she was done with politics. But then she once again decided to take a risk, ran, and won by 73 percent.

I encourage you to risk greatly, make the tough right choices, and use your passport. Young lawyers, if you are interested in connecting with other attorneys and finding more ways to use your passport, please visit our website (kbyld.org), like us on Facebook, and follow us on Twitter. The YLD has nine different committees that sponsor over 20 programs, serving Kentucky’s lawyers, law students, and community. I leave you with a final quote from Judge Combs. “Everybody leaves footprints. The question is what kind do you leave. As attorneys we have the opportunity to leave giant footprints for the good.”



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A group of former Young Lawyer Division chairs gathered during the YLD Luncheon at the 2016 KBA Annual Convention held in Louisville this past May.

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