



Courage

BY JEANNE MARIE LESLIE

As I write this article, our country is mourning the death of the 38th president of the United States, Gerald R. Ford. President Ford was an instrumental leader during a critical period in the history of our country. My thoughts, however, are on his wife, Betty Ford, a woman of great courage and conviction in her own right. It is amazing that 29 years ago Mrs. Ford entered a hospital for her addiction to sleeping pills, alcohol and other substances. Little did she realize that she would be embarking on a journey that would lend itself to change and hope for the millions of individuals suffering from the disease of addiction. Mrs. Ford was a pioneer for change. Her openness and willingness to share personal battles from breast cancer to addiction continues today to give millions of individuals the courage to deal with their own personal problems. Addiction and depression are issues the legal profession would prefer not to talk about. You don't find many firms discussing wellness or stress management in the board rooms. In fact, the

very thought of these topics produces an air of uneasiness. When under extraordinary stress, professionals of all disciplines, including lawyers, perform their obligations at less than satisfactory levels. Lawyers, in an attempt to cope, may turn to addictive substances or addictive behaviors to get through the tough times. It is no surprise to the professionals who treat lawyers that these issues are prevalent in the legal arena and these types of coping mechanisms, in all professions, can lead to malpractice claims, disciplinary complaints and utter disaster.

What most people don't realize is the enormous amount of suffering associated with these illnesses and the desperation for relief that is often sought. Addressing lawyer mental health impairments is tough but what is tougher is attending the funerals of these lawyers. Talking about these issues, bringing them to the forefront, helps remove the stigma, and enables lawyers to seek help.

Working as the ALAP director I experience extraordinary courage every day. I

witness individuals make remarkable changes in their lives. They become better people, better fathers, better mothers and better lawyers. The fact that there are lawyers with mental health problems in all venues of the legal profession is a reality that is no different from any other profession, but addressing it, talking about it and reaching out and offering assistance takes courage.

The Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program offers confidential help for lawyers throughout Alabama. We offer assistance for stress, depression and addiction. We know these issues are real and we know how to help. Call for assistance, (334) 834-7576 (office), or (334) 224-6920 (24 hours). ■

Jeanne Marie Leslie

Jeanne Marie Leslie, RN, M.Ed, is director of the Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program.