

# A Model of Good Behavior

*A priest, a rabbi and a lawyer walk into a bar ...*

**A**lbert A. Menashe JD'76 is tired of bad jokes about unscrupulous lawyers. "Lawyers do a great deal of good for many segments of our society," he said. "The image we have is not really deserved." Menashe, managing shareholder of Gevurtz, Menashe, Larson & Howe in Portland, has made it his mission for the last 25 years to help change the negative image of lawyers by heightening professionalism among members of the Oregon bar.

"Back in 1981, when I first started working on this issue, lawyers just weren't treating each other very well," he explained. "There was a general lack of civility, and some lawyers were leaving the practice of law because of it." Menashe cited personal attacks on other lawyers and their clients as examples of uncivil behavior he has seen from attorneys.

"There have always been clear rules on ethics," Menashe said. "If you violate them, you can be reprimanded, suspended, disbarred. There's a punitive aspect to being unethical — and no one wants to get in that kind of trouble. But if you're unprofessional, historically the feeling has been, 'so what?'"

In response to what he viewed as an endemic problem among lawyers, Menashe became involved in the Oregon State Bar's Professionalism Committee in 1991. This committee later became the Joint Bench-Bar Commission on Professionalism. Working alongside top judges, lawyers and the deans of Oregon's three law schools, Menashe helped put together a summit on professionalism. After months of work, the group developed guidelines for what law schools, lawyers and judges could do to establish a definitive code of professional conduct for each group.

"All three groups have implemented many of our suggestions — from how we approach the topic of professionalism in law schools, to how we interact as members of the bar," said Menashe, who served as chair of the Joint Bench-Bar Commission on Professionalism in 2003.

One suggestion stemming from the commission's report was the creation of a professionalism program for first-year law students. Willamette University College of Law was the first of the three Oregon law schools to move forward with the idea. "Willamette had the prototype of the program," said Menashe, a member of the College of Law's Board of Visitors. He has participated in Willamette's professionalism program since the late '90s.

"On the first day, in the first hour of orientation, students are taught about professionalism," Menashe explained. "Having the opportunity to address day-old law students is both a treat and an honor. If there is ever a time to start good habits, that's it. If they learn it early, they will carry it into their practice."

Professor Kathy T. Graham, associate dean for academic affairs, has worked closely with Menashe on the professionalism program for close to a decade. In addition to facilitating student discussions and serving as a role model for professional conduct, Graham said Menashe helped expand the professionalism program to include third-year students as well. "He identified the need to hit students again with the material — to make them think about it again before graduating and starting in practice," Graham explained.

"Albert has always been a role model to others coming up behind him," Graham said. "He is an esteemed elder statesman of the bar. He wants to teach others the importance of professionalism and the most effective way to be a lawyer."

Like the students he mentors, Menashe had effective role models who gave him support and guidance in his youth — just not always those he expected to. During his senior year of high school in Portland, he asked his college counselor for advice on applying to schools. Menashe, the son of Greek immigrants, wanted to be the first in his immediate family to earn a college degree. The high school counselor didn't share his vision. Despite having earned strong grades, "He told me I was too stupid to go to college," Menashe said.

"I walked out of that office and left my dreams of going to college behind," Menashe said. "I just assumed the counselor was right. When you come from a family of immigrants, when you're not affluent and someone says you're not going to college, you just believe it." His high school football coach, however, refused to let him give up. The coach helped Menashe enroll in the University of Oregon, where he graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a degree in political science.

“Even at that time, I intended to be a lawyer,” Menashe explained. “I’ve wanted to be a lawyer since I was very young. The law always interested me. I saw it as a way to help others.” Two of Menashe’s cousins had attended Willamette’s law school, and he wanted to follow in their footsteps.

After his first year at the College of Law, Menashe applied for a clerkship with Clark, Marsh & Lindauer, a general practice firm in Salem. He was interviewed by the firm’s second-year clerk, Valerie J. Vollmar JD’75. Vollmar said the firm’s partners helped teach the young clerks what it meant to be a professional lawyer. “You couldn’t have asked for finer lawyers to work with and observe,” she said. “But Albert came to the clerkship with the right work ethic and sense of how you treat people. He already had that — which is really the core of professional behavior.”

Menashe said the clerkship helped set the direction for a career in family law. Although he never had a family law class in school, clerking at the firm gave him hands-on experience handling divorces and custody cases. Five years after graduating from the College of Law, Menashe and his partner established Gevurtz, Menashe, Larson & Howe, the first law firm in the state to specialize in family law. Their firm is now one of the largest family law practices in the country.

Menashe said he finds family law to be very meaningful work, despite the emotional upheaval it presents to clients. “Divorce is hard,” he said. “People come in stressed, upset and angry. They are afraid for their future and well being. My job is to help them through the process and give them a new start in life. When done well, people start to feel respected again.”

Menashe, now in his 25th year of running the firm, said the most difficult part of his job is dealing with unreasonable lawyers. “In family law, you expect your clients to be troubled and difficult, but the lawyers can be just as bad,” he said. “In reality, only a small number of lawyers today are unprofessional, but they make the practice of law unpleasant for the rest of us and our clients.”

Vollmar said Menashe has been successful in family law because he remains professional in even the most difficult situations. “He doesn’t permit his clients’ emotions to damage their cause,” she said. “Family law is wrenching work, but he is able to distance himself from it and remain effective.”

According to Menashe, attorneys who wage personal battles have lost sight of the client’s best interest. “Unprofessional lawyers just need to focus on the issues at hand,” Menashe said of his even-handed approach to family law. “The issues of a case are not personal ones.”

Despite some lawyers’ refusal to play nice, Menashe said he believes professionalism among lawyers has increased over the past decade. “All the signs are good,” he said. “Students graduating now understand the importance of professionalism. The problem isn’t really with them; the problem is with the lawyers my age. The likelihood they will change depends on the degree of pressure put on them by other lawyers who insist on it.”

No doubt, Menashe will do his part to ensure that pressure remains steady.

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**WUCL’S RICH HISTORY WITH THE OSB**

Albert A. Menashe JD’76 recently was named the 2007 president-elect of the Oregon State Bar (OSB). A number of distinguished College of Law graduates have served as OSB president throughout the past 20 years.

**Stuart E. Foster JD’67**

*October ’89 – September ’90*  
Partner, Foster Denman LLP  
Medford

**William B. Crow JD’61**

*October ’91 – September ’92*  
Shareholder, Schwabe Williamson & Wyatt PC  
Portland

**Jeffrey J. Carter JD’82**

*October ’96 – September ’97*  
Sole Proprietor, Law Offices of Jeffrey Carter  
Salem

**Lawrence B. Rew JD’61**

*October ’99 – December ’00*  
Former Partner (retired), Corey Byler Rew  
Lorenzen & Hojem LLP  
Pendleton

**Angel G. Lopez JD’78**

*January ’02 – December ’02*  
Partner, Squires & Lopez PC  
Portland

**Nena Cook JD’91**

*January ’05 – December ’05*  
Partner, Sussman Shank LLP  
Portland