

# Celebrating 25 Years of Certification

BY DENISE MULLEN, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF LEGAL SPECIALIZATION

As board certification for North Carolina lawyers marks its milestone 25th year, the Board of Legal Specialization recognizes and celebrates the 59 lawyers who earned this distinction at the program's inception in 1987.

## Notable Accomplishment

The certification program assists in the delivery of legal services to the public by identifying lawyers who have demonstrated special knowledge, skill, and proficiency in a specific field. By identifying these lawyers, members of the public can more closely match their needs with available services. In addition, the legal specialization program seeks to improve the competency of members of the Bar by establishing an additional incentive for lawyers to participate in continuing legal education and to concentrate their efforts on becoming proficient in a specialty practice area.

Board certification is a notable accomplishment. Within the North Carolina legal community, board certification means a lawyer has substantial, relevant experience in a select field of law as well as demonstrated and tested proficiency in that practice area.

There are more than 25,000 active lawyers licensed to practice in North Carolina. Only 826 are board certified. Board certified lawyers earn the right to publicly represent themselves as specialists in a specialty practice area. In fact, they are the only lawyers allowed by the North Carolina State Bar to do so. This designation sets them apart as being lawyers with a public commitment to excellence in their area of law. The process is voluntary and can only take place after a lawyer has obtained significant practice experience in the specialty area for five years. Board certification requires an ongoing commitment to the specialty area which must be verified every five years with references from peers in the specialty. It also requires additional annual continuing legal education so that

the specialists stay abreast of current trends in law.

## Launching the Program

When the program began in 1987, three areas of certification were offered: bankruptcy law, estate planning and probate law, and real property law (commercial and/or residential). There were 92 lawyers in the initial class of applicants who passed the exams and became board certified specialists. Of that number, 59 have maintained the certification for the last 25 years!<sup>1</sup>

## Celebrating 25 Years

The lawyers who supported the program in the early days have enjoyed watching the program succeed and expand, adding seven new specialty areas: appellate practice, criminal (including the new juvenile delinquency subspecialty), elder, family, immigration, social security disability, and workers' compensation. The Board of Legal Specialization congratulates the legal specialists who have maintained their certification for 25 years. Thank you for your dedication to your specialty practice area and your loyalty to the specialization program. In recognition of their accomplishments, the 25 year specialists were asked to reflect on why they became certified and what certification has meant to their careers. Excerpts from the specialists' comments follow.

## Reflections from Some of the Specialists

**Why did you pursue certification the first year it was offered in 1987?**

**Holmes Harden**, a board certified specialist in business and consumer bankruptcy law practicing in Raleigh: "I wanted to be identified as having special legal skills.



Harden

'Specialist' was not a word we could use to describe ourselves before 1987, and I believed that being so designated would help me build my practice as a young lawyer."

**Trawick Stubbs**,\*\* a board certified specialist in business and consumer bankruptcy law practicing in New Bern: "Actually, Alan Head suggested that I apply as it was my main field. I also appreciated the professionalism and client service aspects



Stubbs

of the program."

**Michael Godwin**, a board certified specialist in estate planning and probate law practicing in Greensboro: "I wanted to convey to clients and referral sources my competence and my commitment to being a first-rate professional."

**Robert Ray**, a board certified specialist in estate planning and probate law practicing in Fayetteville: "I felt strongly that if the State Bar was going to certify attorneys as specialists in an area where my practice was concentrated, then I wanted to be among those certified! I am proud to have been in the first class of board certified lawyers."

**R. Woody Harrison**,\*\* a board certified specialist in residential real property law practicing in Wilson: "I pursued certification to help lead the way in hopes that all real property attorneys would certify and encourage realtors to send closings only to certified attorneys. I maintain the certification out of loyalty and belief in the concept."

**E. Fred McPhail Jr.**,\*\* a board certified specialist in commercial real property law practicing in Charlotte: "When the specialization program was conceived, Cliff Everett Sr. was the president of the NC State Bar and Charlie Fulton was the president of the NC Bar Association. Charlie recommended me to Cliff as a member of the initial real prop-

erty specialty committee. I was very flattered to be considered for this position by two of the most distinguished attorneys I have known. Our committee, chaired by Dick Glaze, helped to formulate the program for real property specialization, and members of the committee were allowed to apply for certification. My practice at that time was primarily real property and I felt that specialization was the wave of the future, especially for those who practice in the larger cities.”



Holding

**Graham Holding**

Jr., a board certified specialist in estate planning and probate law practicing in Charlotte: “I thought it would be beneficial for clients—as well as other lawyers—to know that I not only specialized in estate

planning and fiduciary law, but was also board certified and that as a result they would expect me to be knowledgeable in this area.”

**Why have you maintained certification for 25 years?**

**Sara H. Davis,\*** a board certified specialist in business and consumer bankruptcy law practicing in Asheville: “Shortly after I was certified I became a member of the Board of Legal Specialization and then chair of the Board. As I became more involved in the nationwide move to specialization I realized how important board certification is as a way for consumers to identify attorneys with special expertise in certain areas of the law. Trying to find a lawyer by looking in the phone book is not a very comfortable search. Seeing the designation of an attorney as a board certified specialist makes finding a good attorney a lot more certain. I believe in the program; I am aware of the hard work many lawyers have put in over the years to make this a successful program, and the equally hard work of the State Bar staff to keep the program credible and viable.”

**J. Michael Booe,\*\*** a board certified specialist in business and consumer bankruptcy law practicing in Charlotte: “I decided to pursue the board certification at first for mainly competitive purposes. Once I had achieved it, I was proud of the distinction and didn’t want to let it go.”

**E. Cordell Avery,\*\*** a board certified specialist in residential real property law practicing in Greenville: “I am proud of my real property practice. This is not a practice area in which one should dabble. I want my clients to know that their real property matters are being handled by an attorney who must meet strict requirements of skill and professionalism.”



Avery

*Hats Off to the Class of 1987!*

**Bankruptcy Law**

- Rayford K. Adams III
- Herbert F. Allen
- David R. Badger
- Steven L. Beaman
- J. Michael Booe
- Gregory B. Crampton
- Donald A. Davis
- Sara H. Davis
- Albert F. Durham
- Terri L. Gardner
- David G. Gray
- Joseph W. Grier III
- Holmes P. Harden
- Edward C. Hay Jr.
- Richard M. Hutson II
- Bruce F. Jobe
- Robert K. Johnson
- Anita Jo Kinlaw-Troxler
- Richard M. Mitchell
- Roger A. Moore
- Robert M. Pitts
- P. Wayne Sigmon
- Richard D. Sparkman
- Trawick H. Stubbs Jr.
- Douglas Q. Wickham
- John S. Williford Jr.
- N. Hunter Wyche Jr.

**Estate Planning/Probate Law**

- Richard A. Bigger Jr.
- Lawrence E. Bolton
- Michael A. Colombo
- Thomas R. Crawford
- Michael H. Godwin

- Robert C. Gunst
- Robert H. Haggard
- Charles B. Hahn
- John C. Hine
- Graham D. Holding Jr.
- C. Gray Johnsey
- Ronald P. Johnson
- Brian F. D. Lavelle
- Scott E. Lebensburger
- Paul H. Livingston Jr.
- Neill G. McBryde
- Michael L. Miller
- James W. Narron
- Richard A. Orsbon
- Robert G. Ray
- Christy Eve Reid
- W.Y. Alex Webb

**Real Property - Residential and Commercial**

- Alfred G. Adams
- Douglas O. Thigpen

**Real Property - Commercial**

- Howard L. Borum
- M. Jay DeVaney
- E. Fred McPhail, Jr.
- Samuel T. Oliver Jr.

**Real Property - Residential**

- E. Cordell Avery
- Frank W. Erwin
- R. Woody Harrison Jr.
- Sheryl H. Williams



Adams

soning behind the need for specialization and I am proud of being named as a legal specialist. I worked hard to achieve the designation, and so it is natural to hold onto those things one values in the legal profession.”

**Douglas Q. Wickham,** a board certified specialist in business and consumer bankruptcy law practicing in Raleigh: “I initially pursued certification to set myself apart from

the ordinary. I have maintained it because I see that people and businesses with more complex legal situations are more likely to make contact with me.”

**Michael A. Colombo,\*\*** a board certified specialist in estate planning and probate law practicing in Greenville: “The things that I hoped would come with achieving board certification have happened. I was a young lawyer with a small firm in a small town. My certification made a statement to other lawyers, bank officers, the local community, and even the wider community of lawyers state-wide. I began to see a difference in the way they related to me. I had a credential that others could see as an objective validation of my knowledge and experience.”

**N. Hunter Wyche Jr.,\*\*** a board certified specialist in business and consumer bankruptcy law practicing in Raleigh: “I initially pursued the board certification designation mostly for personal satisfaction, but maintained it over the years because I realized that it was too precious to drop!”

**How has certification been helpful to your practice?**

**Richard M. Hutson,\*\*** a board certified specialist in business and consumer bankruptcy law practicing in Durham: “I have found certification to be most helpful in gaining referrals made to me from other specialists. I also use the directory of specialists quite often when I make referrals.”

**Graham Holding Jr.,** a board certified specialist in estate planning and probate law practicing in Charlotte: “I think it has helped in giving clients and other lawyers more confidence in my services knowing that I am board certified. The additional CLE requirements in this area have also been helpful in ensuring that I continue to be knowledgeable and am keeping abreast of developments.”

**Christy Eve Reid,\*** a board certified specialist in estate planning and probate law practicing in Charlotte: “Board certification



Reid

keeps me current in my practice area and gives clients confidence in having me as their attorney.”

**Charles B. Hahn,** a board certified specialist in estate planning and probate law practicing in Greensboro: “Certification allows for continuing professional development and gives me a feeling of accomplishment. It also helps in client development, particularly referrals. It shows that I have taken that extra step toward competence in a particular field.” (photo)



Hahn

**Bruce F. Jobe,** a board certified specialist in business and consumer bankruptcy law practicing in Lumberton: “I initially supported the NC State Bar specialization program to help identify specialists in specific legal areas. Being a board certified specialist identifies me to the public and has helped me with referrals from other attorneys and initial contacts from potential clients.”



Jobe

**W.Y. Alex Webb,** a board certified specialist in estate planning and probate law practicing in Aberdeen: “The certification attracted and retained clients who appreciate the best. It proves to associates (and current and future partners)



Webb

that I am committed to practicing this specialty at a high level.”

**Rayford K (Trip) Adams III,\*\*** a board certified specialist in business and consumer bankruptcy law practicing in Winston-Salem: “It has been very helpful to be a part of the group of bankruptcy specialists. By definition, we are all committed to this practice area and devote a significant portion of our practices to bankruptcy. We have a presence in the bankruptcy bar and we know that each of us is tuned in to what’s happening in the practice area.”



Adams

**James W. Narron,\*\*** a board certified specialist in estate planning and probate law practicing in Smithfield – “Board certification has done a lot to help the public realize that competent legal services are available in smaller communities, where access may be easier and overhead is smaller. We also have to be aware of the public perception of the legal profession. A large part of our job is to foster in the minds of the public the perception that lawyers are good and capable people. That is the whole intent and purpose of the certification program.”



Narron

\*Served on board of legal specialization

\*\*Served on specialty committee

### Endnote

1. Most of the lawyers who are no longer certified have retired from the practice of law.

## Annual Meeting

You are asked to take notice that the annual meeting of the North Carolina State Bar will be held on Friday, October 26, 2012, in conjunction with the council's quarterly business meeting. Further, the council will hold an election on Thursday, October 25, 2012, at 11:45 a.m. at the Raleigh Marriott City Center, Fayetteville Street, Raleigh, to choose the agency's president-elect, vice-president, and secretary-treasurer for 2012-2013. All members of the Bar are welcome to attend these events.