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Have I really fooled everyone?

By **ROBERT L. BRENNA JR.**
Daily Record Columnist

A few years ago, as I prepared to give a lecture for the New York State Bar Association, I remember telling my wife “the fraud I had perpetrated on the bar for decades would be evident within the first two minutes of my presentation.”

Presenting a CLE can be daunting. You can imagine that lecturing to fellow attorneys is a challenge, but also it forces you to really study the topic. As it turned out, things went all right after all. My wife tells me I worry too much — go figure.

Of course it is no secret that when one mentions that he or she is an attorney, the jokes immediately fly, and occasionally the comments are less than one would wish even on an enemy.

Still, my admiration and love for the practice of law continues and has increased over the years, regardless of the jokes. As I grew up — at least as far as I grew — my father told me that there is nothing more honorable than the legal profession.

The headline above refers to the fact that

“Have I really fooled anyone?” refers to an old story about Gerry Spence who, when he was in law school, was surprised to learn that he was doing well. Since Wyoming is a small jurisdiction, his dean also was in charge of the bar admissions. When Gerry was called into the dean's office one day, he assumed the worst, only to learn that the dean wanted to tell him personally that he had scored the highest grade in the state.

He left the dean's office muttering: “I fooled them, too”.

No matter how confident we wish to be, the majority of the attorneys I admire most struggle often with their self image. The jokes don't help.

As a practical matter, people may not think economics have an impact on the profession of law, but nothing could be further from the truth. How, you may ask, can Brenna possibly segue and tie this all into one theme? It's not as difficult as it sounds.

The ego and economics of the practice of law sometimes go hand in hand, and sometimes have no correlation whatsoever. But I will tell you that being allowed to serve as president of the New York State Academy of Trial Lawyers is humbling, and I can't help sometimes but mutter: “I fooled them, too.”

The academy maintains a strong commitment to protect, preserve and enhance the civil justice system, while working to rebuild and improve the image of our profession. From noon to 2 p.m. on Feb. 26, my partner Sheldon Boyce will present a CLE at the Rochester Plaza Hotel entitled “Critical Ethics Update:

Need-to-Know Information about New York's Move to the Model Code,” covering the new rules set to take effect April 1. The update will provide two ethics credit hours, and will be short enough to fit into the lunch hour. The academy welcomes members of both the plaintiff's and the defense bar.

Specifically, all of our CLEs are free to members, including the Annual Update program — a seven-credit course covering nine topics of law critical to trial attorneys. Typically we present between 30 and 40 CLEs each year statewide; six or seven of them here in Rochester. An entire firm can join the academy for \$1,000 per year, which amounts to a substantial reduction in overhead since up to 10 lawyers and all paralegals can attend every CLE at no charge.

The same old crew you are used to still travels here, and throughout the state annually, including Professor Hutter, Dan Santola, Dave Horowitz, Benedene Cannata and many other presenters who have been kind enough to come here for more than a decade. (Actually, it's almost reaching the two-decade mark.) We hope you will join us and many other lawyers from throughout the state who are committed to undertaking the fundamental changes that must be made to rebuild our profession.

In addition to the free CLE, academy membership comes with lots of other benefits. For each new attorney member, weekly department updates summarizing the most important cases from the four appellate divisions, networking receptions, including our annual Law Day celebration, daily e-clips news service and more.

You've heard me kvetch enough about my surgery and ensuing recovery, but one of my goals for my tenure as president has been to get the word out about the academy. Losing several months of that tenure means that I need to do all I can in a short period of time.

Accordingly, I ask you to visit our Web site at trialacademy.org, call Executive Director Michelle Stern at (518) 364-4044, or call me directly if you prefer. Don't worry, you haven't fooled everyone, and together we can continue to instill even greater pride in being members of the profession of which my dad taught me to be so proud.

Robert L. Brenna Jr. is a partner in the Rochester law firm of Brenna, Brenna & Boyce PLLC, which his father founded. He is president of the New York State Academy of Trial Lawyers and concentrates his practice in the areas of catastrophic personal injury and trusts and estates. Brenna also hosts a Sunday morning radio program entitled “The Brenna & Brenna Law Forum,” on WHAM 1180 AM at 8 a.m., online at www.wham1180.com.

