

Reflections – I Am A Corporal

Brian K. Jones¹

During the Revolutionary War, a group of soldiers was ordered to raise a heavy timber which the enemy had used to block the road. They could scarcely lift it from the road. A young corporal stood by, urging the men to lift hard, and shouting, “Now boys, right up!” With each subsequent failure to move the immense timber, the corporal’s commands sounded more and more severe. A superior officer passing by observed the efforts of the men and the sharp commands of the corporal. He rode up to them, dismounted, and lent his own strength to the task, lifting with the men. When the timber was in place, the officer asked the corporal why he did not help with the task.

“Why, I am a corporal,” he replied.

“I am George Washington,” responded the officer.

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As attorneys, we have many occupational hazards, but rarely do our loved ones worry that we will not make it home. Perhaps we will not make it home for dinner, or homework time, or the big game, but we eventually do make it home.

Our first responders in Chicagoland run the genuine risk every day of giving everything for our safety. We may not be able to raise timber on the front lines with them, but there are unique ways that we can help their families and bring peace of mind to them.

No matter how busy or sophisticated our practice becomes, we can take a page from George Washington: we can change our lifestyles to make room for helping first responders in a way that only attorneys can.

Wills For Heroes Foundation

The Wills For Heroes Foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that was created after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Attorney Anthony Hayes in Columbia, South Carolina contacted his local fire department to inquire how we, as lawyers, might give back to first responders. An informal focus group was formed and concluded that most first responders did not have adequate estate plans. This state of affairs is unfortunately shared by most adults, but due to their line of work, first responders have a more pressing need.

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As the program's popularity grew, the American Bar Association's Young Lawyer Division adopted Wills For Heroes as its 2007-2008 national public service program. Currently, over twenty-four states have active, ongoing Wills For Heroes programs with three states in the process of implementing new programs. A standalone committee has been created within the Chicago Bar Association to focus on this need. With the assistance of repeat volunteers and tireless committee members, we have completed well over 1,500 estate plans for Chicagoland first responders. Upcoming events are scheduled at the Chicago Police Department Headquarters for each month September through November and January through May.

Anatomy of a Wills for Heroes Program

The Wills for Heroes program is unlike any other clinic or pro bono legal program because the service is brought to the first responders' doorstep. Working with department coordinators, the Wills for Heroes program provides this free service by bringing together first responders with attorneys, notaries and witnesses at a department station, training facility or headquarters on a predetermined event date, usually a Saturday. In advance of the event, client participants download and complete an estate planning questionnaire.

Upon arrival at the Wills for Heroes event, the first responder is assigned to an attorney who reviews the questionnaire, conducts the meeting, and prepares estate planning documents (consisting of a Will, Power of Attorney for Healthcare and Power of Attorney for Property). Once the client has approved of them, the documents are signed, witnessed and notarized on the spot. On average, it takes about an hour to complete each officer's estate planning documents. The participant is able to take home the original documents on the same day.

Volunteers with all levels of experience and legal background are welcome and useful. There are roles for both attorneys and non-attorneys to fill, and no estate planning experience is necessary.

Will you lead as a Corporal or as a General?

If you are interested in learning more, please contact me directly or visit our website, www.WillsforHeroes.org. It's amazing what six hours on a Saturday morning can accomplish for our community.