



## It's A (Wonderful) Lawyer's Life

Have a "George Bailey" moment – reflect on how you as a lawyer have changed lives for the better.

One of my favorite holiday movies is the classic *It's a Wonderful Life*, with Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey.

As the proprietor of a "building and loan" (remember those?) in a small town, struggling to make ends meet, George Bailey finds his life crashing down around him. His absent-minded uncle loses the cash the building and loan owes to the bank (actually, the money is stolen by the antagonist, wealthy power broker and town curmudgeon Mr. Potter, who wants to drive George out of business so he can make more money charging high rents to the town's working class citizens for his ramshackle apartments rather than enable them to buy their own homes).

George contemplates suicide, repeatedly commenting on how the world would be a better place without him, and how he wishes he "were never born." His "guardian angel" (Clarence) is dispatched to help. Clarence temporarily grants George's wish – that he had never been born – to show him what the world would be like without him.

In the process, George realizes that his many sacrifices and good works have saved lives and permitted others to do good things in return. His hometown would be a truly dismal place without the help he and his business provided. He prays to be returned to the world as it really is, with him in it. He realizes his wish is granted when he finds some rose petals in his pocket that his youngest child – "Zuzu" – had given him the night he set off to kill himself.

So why, you ask, is the ISBA president giving me this movie synopsis? Because I find it helpful and inspiring to view this story through the prism of being a lawyer.

Ours is not an easy job. Most of us have had those times when we feel as though the world is against us, and we want to toss it all in.

If that happens, have a "George Bailey" moment. Reflect on the ways in which you, as a lawyer, have had a positive impact on the world and the lives of others.

It is virtually impossible as a lawyer not to have performed numerous good deeds. People come to lawyers because they are in trouble or need help solving a problem. If their problems were not serious, they would not seek our assistance in the first place. Thus, the very nature of our profession – like that of physicians, teachers, scientists, and some others – provides us an opportunity to have a positive impact on people's lives.

Some of us may have the occasional opportunity to have a positive impact on the lives of many in one fell swoop through "impact" cases involving, for example, constitutional rights or product liability or class actions, which can provide an engine for significant social change. But the importance or value of our efforts is not judged based on the "size of the deal" or the amount of money at stake. George Bailey's good deeds were done one person at a time.

Grassroots service to those most in need – the working poor, the indigent, the disenfranchised, the desperate, the disadvantaged – often yield the greatest benefits. Relatively speaking, the person who needs assistance to obtain child support or visitation rights, or confront an eviction or foreclosure notice, or redress a serious injury or find a way out of crushing debt, or navigate the criminal justice system – problems

which, if not solved, would dramatically affect their lives and those of their loved ones – provide us with the greatest opportunity to do good. These are often the people most grateful for our help. Relatively speaking, it is the lives of these people, not the rich and powerful, that are most affected for the better by the help we provide.

It's not the "size of the deal" that matters. George Bailey's good deeds were done one person at a time.

Sometimes we forget the things we have done – often very simple things that don't seem momentous to us at the time – that have greatly improved people's lives. If each of us had a "George Bailey" experience, we would undoubtedly be pleased, and perhaps surprised, at how we have affected the world for the better.

Take some time after you read this to reflect on that thought, feel good about yourself and your profession, and recommit yourself to the spirit of lawyering.

And while you are doing all that, make sure not to lose "Zuzu's rose petals." The positive impact we can have is not limited to our professional lives. Charity and good works begin at home.

My sincere wishes to all of you for a happy holiday season, and for a healthy, prosperous, and fulfilling new year and beyond. ■