

Distraction Doesn't Trip Activist Law Professor

By William Vogeler
Daily Journal Staff Reporter

While addressing a roomful of yuppie generation lawyers and lawyers-to-be, the 1960s-era attorney may have thought he was being heckled.

In response to Michael Tigar's call for changes in the legal profession, someone said under his breath "hardly likely."

Tigar, who has defended clients such as activist Angela Davis and David Dellinger of the "Chicago Seven," stopped to respond to the remark during his speech to nearly 700 young lawyers and summer clerks. Now in his late 40s, Tigar squinted as he looked across the room to detect the source of the discordant comment.

The room was as noticeably quiet as it had been uproarious at other moments in the speech, "Lawyering and the Passion for Justice."

Tigar grabbed the podium forcefully with two hands, leaned his large body forward and then arched back to deliver his retort — the pig story.

A Texan, Tigar described a rural scene and a town with two policeman who had just acquired a new patrol vehicle. As the officers roared down a country road, they passed an overalled teen-ager.

"Pig!" the youth yelled.

Unheeding, the policemen blazed by, only to crash into a 400-pound pig that was crossing the road just ahead.

"Understand the difference between an insult and a warning," Tigar said to the unknown audience member as he reclaimed the crowd and continued to call for changes in the profession.

He challenged the men and women at the Los Angeles County Bar Association Barristers' dinner meeting to campaign for greater opportunities for women in law practice, to donate more time to legal services for the poor and to champion equality for ethnic minorities.

"We've got a chance to build a law practice that is better," he said.

Tigar, a professor at the University of Texas School of Law and chair-elect of the American Bar Association's Litigation Section, said women have not risen in the profession at the same pace as men, even though women make up 45 percent of the graduating law school classes. He advocated more women law professors to serve as mentors on campuses.

"The composition of the faculty has got to change," he said, drawing applause that resurfaced in a standing ovation at the end of the evening.

Tigar urged the audience to volunteer

legal services to the poor. He challenged the young lawyers and clerks who were hosted at the meeting by the city's most prestigious law firms to tell their bosses they wanted to do pro bono work.

Tigar said he was aware that young lawyers are often required to work long hours, but he said he supported mandatory pro bono work. He compared the overworked associate to the poor Bob Cratchit of "A Christmas Carol" having to work all night on Christmas Eve.

"Cratchit, you're going to work all night," Tigar said, mimicking a Scrooge-like managing partner.

"My sympathy has eroded knowing that when Cratchit does go home it will be in his BMW," he said.

Tigar told the Barristers gathering he understood the burdens of young lawyerhood. As editor of the law review at University of California, Berkeley, he had been selected to clerk for U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Brennan. However, he lost the opportunity because of political differences.

"Young people feel increasingly that they face a profession that is hostile to their aspirations," he said. "As a consequence, we see failed relationships, substance abuse."

He recalled a misprint in a law firm's recruiting brochure that comically illustrated a problem for new lawyers.

"We are engaged in converting all of our young lawyers to computers," he quoted from the brochure.

But he asked the young lawyers and clerks to counter the negative aspects of the legal profession. Reflecting on his recent trips to South Africa where he has met with Nelson Mandela's lawyer, Tigar said the struggle for equality is not over in America either.

"Two thousand feet from here I will show you an urban landscape littered with the shards of human lives," he said.

He criticized the U.S. Supreme Court for its decisions on discrimination and the death penalty this term, and he said the decisions were authored by "persons that have no experience with the human condition." He said a disproportionate number of the Death Row inmates in the United States are ethnic minorities.

"Walk with me down the burgeoning Death Rows of America," he said. "There is a need."



STEPHEN LAFERNEY / Daily Journal

University of Texas law professor Michael Tigar spoke last week in Los Angeles.

Regular Networking columnist Arleen Stibleman is vacationing.