

# NEW ORLEANS BAR ASSOCIATION

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**Theophile A.  
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2005 Liberty Bell Award Recipient

## *Also inside...*

President's Perspective	3
Bench Bar Conference	4
Liberty Bell Award	6
Young Lawyers Section	18
Around the Bar	22
N.O. Bar & Grille	24
Through the Lens	28

## H. Martin Hunley, Jr.: A Hero of Our Time

by Roger A. Stetter

Tucked away in a nursing home near the Archbishop's residence lives H. Martin Hunley, a mighty lion of the legal kingdom whose roar was silenced by a debilitating stroke some three years ago. His story is told in pictures and memorabilia that hang on the wall of his room at the nursing home: a commanding portrait of his maternal grandfather taken when Martin was just a boy growing up in Donaldsonville, Louisiana; a 1945 picture of Martin in his U.S. Army uniform; a certificate from Tulane Law School commemorating Martin's service as Editor-in-Chief of the Tulane Law Review in 1947; a picture of Martin's beautiful wife, Agnes, who he had the good fortune to meet at the home of a French lady in 1948 and marry that same year; and many pictures of their seven children and their beloved grandchildren. There is also a wonderful 1985 portrait of Martin at the Lemle & Kelleher law firm where he served as a partner for over 50 years, and rose to prominence as one of the leading medical malpractice defense lawyers in Louisiana.

I visit Martin often and we talk about the old days at Lemle & Kelleher. The good times when doctors would come to Martin with their legal woes and he would calmly take command and put their minds at ease; when young lawyers from every part of the firm could go to Martin and he would drop whatever he was doing to help them unravel a legal problem; when we would celebrate a legal victory over lunch at the former International House, followed by cigars and coffee. We talk about the gifted and interesting lawyers who were our partners and the wonderful staff who made our labors easier. We talk about our families and friends, weddings, births, deaths, literature, and a million other things. But mostly we just enjoy one another's company.

What does it mean to work closely with a great lawyer and mentor like Martin Hunley? It's not something you can learn from a book or a movie. It's more like having a pal who is every bit as interested in helping you achieve your goals as he is in managing his own work. Martin balanced the roles of mentor and practitioner as well as any lawyer I have ever known. He never bragged about his own achievements, never cared a fig about office politics, and simply set himself to the task of being a good and honest lawyer.

In his *Notes on the Practice of Law* (1850), Abe Lincoln wrote: There is a vague popular belief that lawyers are necessarily dishonest... Let no young man, choosing the law for a calling, for a moment yield to this popular belief. Resolve to be honest at all events; and if, in your own judgment, you cannot be an honest lawyer, resolve to be honest without

being a lawyer.

When we read these words, we all realize that Martin Hunley chose his calling well. He is a shining example of the honest lawyer and of professionalism in the practice of law. Ask anyone who ever tried a case with or against Martin, and they will all tell you the same thing: he is a consummate lawyer and a gentleman.

Legend has it that Martin once admonished a lawyer not to curse at a deposition because a lady was present – the court reporter, and that he turned down the representation of *Playboy* in 1960 because he did not approve of its degrading portrayal of women as sex objects.

Martin was a most affable and persuasive advocate who could disarm a hostile witness easily and present difficult scientific evi-

dence to a jury in simple terms which they could readily understand. The driving force of his intellect and charm, coupled with an incredible memory for detail, resulted in a nearly complete string of victories at trial over a career spanning more than half a century. Martin is also a lawyer who would not let his work interfere with his family life. After a day's work in an ongoing jury trial, Martin would shift gears if necessary and take his granddaughter to a night-time Carnival parade.

My mind flashes back to the pictures in Martin's room and the man I see before me today. The dashing young Major in his army uniform, the happy warrior at Lemle & Kelleher, the dignified octogenarian whose seeming anonymity belies a glorious record of past achievement. Who can fail to recognize that all of these images of Martin are part and parcel of the same enduring spirit

and the same great teacher he has always been. Clinging tenaciously to life, showing no hint of despair or self-pity, graciously welcoming all visitors, Martin is the model of exemplary wisdom and grace - qualities that each of us must strive for in our personal and professional lives.

Martin, my dear friend and mentor, I believe these words by the Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, were written for you:

Do not go gentle into that good night  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

*Editor's Note - Sadly, Martin Hunley, Jr. passed away before this publication went to print.*



H. Martin Hunley, Jr.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roger A. Stetter is a trial lawyer in New Orleans and practiced law with Martin Hunley for 16 years at the Lemle & Kelleher firm.