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Britton Elected New NCATL President

Fayetteville attorney Rebecca Britton says strength in service — to the public and to the legal profession — will be the theme of her tenure as president of the North Carolina Academy of Trial Lawyers in the coming year.

Britton was elected to the academy's top post and Raleigh lawyer Joseph B. Cheshire V was named president-elect at the group's annual convention in Sunset Beach.

Britton, a partner at Hutchens, Senter & Britton, becomes the 32nd president of the organization, which numbers nearly 4,000 members across the state. She is the third Fayetteville lawyer to be elected academy president.

A 1992 Campbell University law school graduate, Britton has served as the academy's president-elect, vice-president for public education, and host director for the 2005 National High School Mock Trial Championship. Her litigation practice focuses on medical negligence, personal injury and civil rights.

In 2002, Britton received the academy's Kellie Crabtree Award for her work exonerating Lesly Jean, a former Marine who served nine years for a crime he didn't commit.

'Strength In Service'

In a telephone interview last week, Britton said her goal as president was to build on the academy's legacy of public service.

"We become strong through our service to the public, to our profession and to our peers," she told Lawyers Weekly. "I want to focus on that in the coming year because it's very important from the standpoint of the public's perception of attorneys and of what we do. Many lawyers do a lot of public service but people don't know about it. I'd like to increase the awareness of what we do in our communities and what we give back."

Britton said a committee on the judiciary will be formed "to seek out ways to improve relations with the judiciary and provide assistance in any way we can." That would include looking at the issue of judicial elections versus other means of selection, according to Britton.

Another focus: putting together a mentoring program to match up seasoned attorneys with newer members of the profession.

"They would become a resource to help newer lawyers find their place in their community and in their practice area," said Britton.

Britton also said a committee on public service and marketing would be formed to address negative public perceptions of attorneys.

"This has always been an issue — there have always been lawyer jokes — but I think it's been a little more prominent over the last several years. It's affecting legislative goals, it's affecting our clients, and we need to be positioned to do something about it."

The academy will be launching a members-only "tool box" on its Web site to help attorneys on another aspect of public service, said Britton — educating the public.

"It will provide all kinds of information about our service projects," she said. In addition, if a member sees a newspaper article or opinion piece on a law-related issue, "they can go to the Web site and access the facts they need to construct a response and send it directly from there to their legislator or newspaper."

Cheshire, Other Officers

Cheshire, who has practiced criminal law since 1973, is the founding partner of Cheshire, Parker, Schneider, Bryan and Vitale in Raleigh. He founded the academy's criminal law section and served as its founding chair. His term as president will begin in June 2007.

Other newly-elected members of the academy's executive committee include: Peggy Abrams of Raleigh, education vice-president; David Pishko of Winston-Salem, legal affairs vice-president; Phil Baddour of Goldsboro, legislative vice-president; Mike Anderson of Raleigh, membership vice-president; and Guy Crabtree of Durham, public education vice-president.

Awards

During the convention, the academy also honored judges, attorneys and clients with the following awards:

* Superior Court Judge Russell Lanier Jr. of Duplin County and Durham District Judge Richard G. Chaney received Outstanding Trial Judge Awards. The awards recognize judges who demonstrate a commitment to justice as well as a fair and knowledgeable handling of the law.

* The Kellie Crabtree Award went this year to Joan Faulkner and Dr. John Faulkner of Raleigh and their attorney, Raleigh lawyer Burton Craige of Patterson Harkavy.

The award is named for a North Carolina woman who became an advocate for patients' rights after suffering severe injuries in an automobile accident. It is given to clients who, like Crabtree, had the courage to publicly share their story on behalf of all injured persons, and to the attorney who represents them, a press release states.

* Durham lawyer Kenneth J. "Ken" Rose was honored with the Thurgood Marshall Award, which recognizes selfless service to the people of North Carolina in keeping with the legacy of Justice Marshall.

* Greensboro attorney Harold "Hal" Greeson of the Greeson Law Offices received the academy's Lifetime Contribution Award, which is given to honor a lifetime of outstanding contributions to the academy and its mission.

* The Ebbie Awards are given to individuals selected by the president for exceptional service and commitment to the academy, in keeping with the continued legacy of Ebbie Bailey.

The Ebbie Award winners this year were: Salisbury attorney Mona Lisa Wallace of Wallace & Graham; Durham lawyers Lori Rosemond of Maxwell, Freeman & Bowman, and Carlos Mahoney of Glenn, Mills & Fisher; and academy president emeritus, the late Allen Bailey. His wife Ebbie Bailey will accept the award, a press release states.