

Chattanooga: Lawyer brings civility to court

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By:

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The American Inns of Court

There are 119 lawyers and judges who are members of the local chapter of the American Inns of Court. The organization promotes professionalism and ethics in Chattanooga's legal community. The local chapter recently recognized medical malpractice defense attorney Art Brock with its first-ever "civility" award and plans to name a different Chattanooga lawyer in each following year who embodies one of the highest ideals of the legal profession.

Medical malpractice cases present a "unique challenge" in the civility department, according to one local plaintiff's attorney.

"Emotions always run high," attorney Andy Lewis said. "There's an intensity there that you don't find in other areas of law. There are no relaxed medical malpractice cases."

But Mr. Lewis said his longtime colleague Art Brock, a medical malpractice defense attorney who often has been his courtroom foe, transcends those difficulties with grace and ease.

"Art learns the medicine, and he treats witnesses the same whether they're on his side or against his client," Mr. Lewis said. "He is an excellent lawyer."

Mr. Lewis is not alone in his opinion. The local Chapter of the American Inns of Court recently honored Mr. Brock with its first civility award. The organization's members all are area lawyers and judges who promote social interaction outside the courtroom and the ideal of civility in a profession often defined by confrontation.

"We decided we needed a civility award to honor that person who is not only an effective advocate in the courtroom, but is also civil about it," Hamilton County Circuit Court Judge Neil Thomas said. "You don't have to be mean to be good. That's Art."

Judge Thomas said the decision to recognize Mr. Brock was "unanimous" among the 15 local, state and federal judges who considered numerous nominees. Judge Thomas said he always has been impressed by Mr. Brock's breadth of knowledge and his ability to show restraint and discernment in difficult trials.

"Lawyers have an opportunity to make, let's say, 50 objections during a trial," Judge Thomas said. "But sometimes the foul doesn't hurt you, so you don't have to jump up like a jack-in-the-box all the time. (Mr. Brock) selects his objections and is always very thoughtful as a trial lawyer."

Mr. Brock, 52, moved with his family to Chattanooga in 1990 after a career of traveling the country as an attorney in product liability cases. He is head of the medical malpractice section of the law firm Spears, Moore, Rebman and Williams, P.C.

Speaking by telephone last week from a legal conference in Washington, Mr. Brock said he chose to go into trial work because he considers the "jury trial to still be the most respected and bedrock piece of our justice system."

Mr. Brock wasn't so sure, however, how he had managed to gain such a great amount of personal respect from his peers in Chattanooga over the years. He was soft-spoken, described himself as "low key" and said he was "surprised" by the recent honor.

"I know I try to be a very honest lawyer with people, and if I tell them I'll do something, I'll do it," Mr. Brock said.

Mr. Brock acknowledged that incivility persists in the legal profession, though. He likened such behavior to a "scorched earth" policy that he said some lawyers choose to follow in the name of zealous representation of their clients.

"That's a mistaken belief," Mr. Brock said. "I try to be diligent to my client's cause and at the same time follow my profession's calling to be ethical and civil. I don't believe these things are incompatible."