

Advocacy in the Age of Fewer Trials: The Renewed Case for Inns of Court

By Robert P. Vacchiano

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The art of live advocacy remains a paramount facet of the legal profession. Today, a decrease in trials and increase in remote appearances mean fewer opportunities for members of the profession to hone their skills in this critical area. Inns of court meet this challenge, providing a vital space for both refining one's skills and fostering the collegiality essential to our profession.

Emerging in medieval England, inns of court evolved as unique communities where aspiring lawyers learned directly from seasoned practitioners. This fostered a rich, venerable tradition of mentorship and camaraderie. This concept was perhaps described best in the memoir of Irish barrister Alexander Martin Sullivan, "The Last Serjeant," where he wrote:

The protection that was given to youth was a noble feature of the bar. The knowledge and experience of all were at the disposal of the youngest, and the indulgence and patience of the bench was his as of right. A lad's first brief or two may determine the success or failure of a human life, and as far as kindness and sympathy contrive we tried to pledge success to those who trod in our footsteps...It is one of the



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great humanising influences of the practice of law, this solicitude for the welfare of our professional successors. It is like the care of children that we shall never live to see grown up, or like the pleasure of planting the trees of a future forest, an instinct of the provision of today for the morrow of which we are trustees.

Starting in 1980, this historic tradition was replicated in the United States, and, in 1985, the American Inns of Court Foundation was founded to support the development of the inns on a national level. Today, the American Inns of Court stand in the tradition of English Inns, providing a collegiate community dedicated to the highest standards of legal excellence, ethics, and professionalism.

At the Brennan-Vanderbilt Inn of Court, a civil trial inn and chapter of the American Inns of Court, members of New Jersey's Bench and Bar carry this mission forward. Through a specialized curriculum, our members refine their oral advocacy skills through hands-on training. Interactive workshops and mock trial exercises provide a unique environment for our pupils to receive real-time feedback from esteemed members of the bench and bar.

Additionally, we provide all members with practical, high-value continuing legal education credits through these interactive sessions along with presentations from our Masters, Barristers, and guest speakers.

Beyond the practical skills and credits gained, the Inn offers a unique opportunity to build lasting relationships with peers and members of the judiciary. It creates a community outside of any single firm or organization, allowing for genuine, informal interactions that strengthen the bonds of the profession.

Inns of court are more important now than ever. Historically, trials provided the other mechanism by which advocacy skills passed from one generation of lawyers to the next. The junior lawyer watched the senior practitioner articulate the theme of a case, studied the experienced examiner's handling of witnesses, and absorbed the rhythm of a closing argument. As trials become ever rarer and appearances move to a screen, the transmission of that experience breaks down. A lawyer

can practice for a decade without ever watching a colleague question a witness in person. Remote work has compounded the problem beyond the courtroom, reducing the everyday, informal contact between lawyers of different generations and different firms that once happened in courthouse hallways.

Inns of court fill the gaps in today's legal practice. The inn puts newer lawyers in the room with experienced advocates. It provides regular occasions for the aspiring advocate to walk through the mechanics of trial practice and opportunities for all to break bread with professional colleagues.

We invite both seasoned practitioners and new lawyers to consider joining an inn of court this fall. If you are a firm or practice leader whose young attorneys could benefit from an inn, we encourage you to invest in their growth by sponsoring their membership and supporting their active participation.

More information about inns of court can be found on the American Inns of Court website at <https://www.innsofcourt.org>. Inquiries about membership in the Brennan-Vanderbilt Inn of Court should be sent to the Inn's President, Ron Morgan, at rmorgan@ksmlawoffice.com.

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