

U TODAY



MEMPHIS FOURTH ESTATE TURNS FIVE

OWLS MARK DAILY MEMPHIAN ANNIVERSARY

FEATURED THIS ISSUE



- 6** Andy Cates '89 and friends mark five years of *The Daily Memphian*
- 12** Buck Lewis '73 and team honored for work with [ABAFreeLegalAnswers.org](https://www.abafreelegalanswers.org)
- 14** Bill Townsend '78 develops college search website
- 18** Alumni celebrate Homecoming 2023
- 26** Mark Dumas '90 finds novel use for grandfather's stories

JUSTICE FOR ALL

BY GAYE SWAN

Buck Lewis's compassion a driving force behind FreeLegalAnswers pro bono advice website

Growing up, **Buck Lewis '73** learned compassion from his mom. "My mother's family was extremely poor," he says. "My grandfather was a house painter, so if he wasn't feeling well or the weather was bad, the family had no money coming in. Sometimes, they didn't have enough food from week to week."

His mother told him of times when a lawyer was available to help the family navigate challenges. Through the experiences she shared, Lewis learned what a difference it made to have someone with a little more education in your corner.

"I learned from my mother to treat everyone with respect," Lewis says. "She and my father taught me to regard a good education as a privilege and to pay it forward through public service. The servant-leader culture I was raised in was mirrored and reinforced at MUS."

After earning his undergraduate degree in business and his JD/MBA from the University of Tennessee, Lewis joined the Baker Donelson law firm in 1981. His career has been stellar – he was named Class Action Lawyer of the Year and Appellate Lawyer of the Year twice by Best Lawyers in America and Lawyer of the Year by the *Memphis Business Journal*. With a roster of prestigious clients, he is an inductee in the American Academy of Appellate Lawyers. Lewis has twice received the Presidential Citation from the American Bar Association.

He played a vital role – along with

many others, he will tell you – in activities leading to a recent award for Baker Donelson. On April 20, the ABA Section of Litigation honored the firm with the prestigious 2023 John Minor Wisdom Public Service and Professionalism Award. The national recognition celebrates outstanding contributions to improving access to justice and ensuring that the legal system is inclusive and available to everyone. Baker Donelson was specifically acknowledged for creating and curating FreeLegalAnswers (ABAFreeLegalAnswers.org) since 2010.

Free Legal Answers is a website that allows low-income clients to receive pro bono legal advice from volunteer lawyers – a virtual free legal clinic. The platform was designed to address the justice gap; studies

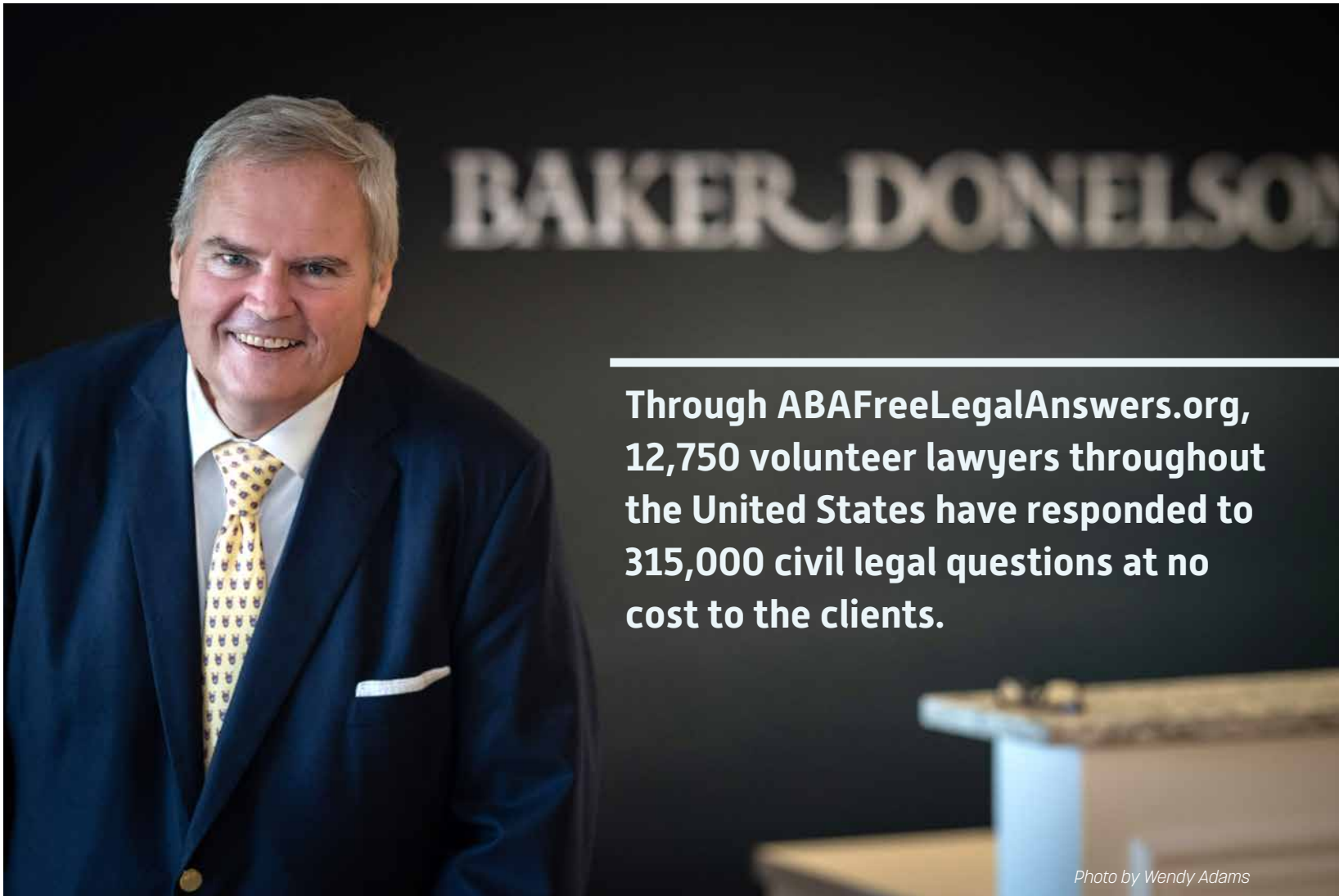
estimate that low-income Americans lack adequate legal help for 92% of their critical civil legal problems.

The driving force behind the creation of the platform? Lewis's vision and determination. He began leading the development of the virtual legal advice clinic while he was serving as president of the Tennessee Bar Association in 2008. "When I went on a listening tour of the state with Chief Justice Janice Holder, I noticed lawyers responding to their paying clients on their Blackberries. I thought it would be an easy way for them to answer legal questions for pro bono clients as well," he says.

"Most lawyers love to experience the joy of pro bono work. I wanted us to offer an easy way for them to represent people



With the American Bar Association Section of Litigation's John Minor Wisdom Award are, from left, Kent Lambert, Baker Donelson New Orleans Office managing shareholder; Jonathan Cole, Baker Donelson Pro Bono Committee chair; Malinda Lewis and her husband, Buck Lewis, past president of the Tennessee Bar Association and past chair of the ABA Pro Bono Public Service Committee; Linda A. Klein, Baker Donelson senior managing shareholder and past president of the ABA; and Danny Van Horn, chair of the ABA Litigation Section and past president of the TBA.



Through ABAFreeLegalAnswers.org, 12,750 volunteer lawyers throughout the United States have responded to 315,000 civil legal questions at no cost to the clients.

Photo by Wendy Adams

anywhere, anytime they could access the internet. The convenience and simplicity of FreeLegalAnswers makes that possible.”

Baker Donelson’s IT staff created the technology to develop an online program that can easily connect pro bono volunteer lawyers with people who need legal assistance. Income-eligible individuals post their civil legal questions to be answered by attorneys from their jurisdiction at no cost to the clients.

While Lewis was serving as chair of the ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service in 2016, the program was made available nationwide.

Today, ABA FreeLegalAnswers is a national online virtual legal clinic with 45 jurisdictions open for client access, including a federal portal that addresses veterans’ benefits and immigration questions and analogous sites in England, Wales, Australia, and New Zealand. Since the

site’s launch, 12,750 volunteer lawyers in the United States have responded to 315,000 civil legal questions.

“Ever since Buck was a student at MUS, if he was passionate about something, you could guarantee that he would execute on that passion beautifully,” says Chairman Emeritus of Baker Donelson **Ben Adams ’74**. “He has been passionate about pro bono legal services for many years. This is an amazing example of what one person can do with vision and persistence. For those who know Buck, it is not all that surprising.”

Lewis calls it a team effort. “The enthusiasm of the team in our tech department, the support of the firm leadership, the Tennessee Bar, the Tennessee Supreme Court, and the American Bar Association have been critical all along the way. And all the MUS alumni at the firm have supported it financially and by volunteering on the site.” (Alumni colleagues include

Adams, **Sam Blair ’74**, **Buck Wellford ’74**, **Spencer Clift ’92**, and **Robert Tom ’96**.)

Looking back, Lewis is grateful for the examples set by the teachers and staff at MUS.

“Headmaster **Ellis Haguewood** and history professor **Mike Deadrick** were both influential to me in terms of a public service ethic – that is something both teachers always stressed as important.”

Reflecting on his pro bono and access-to-justice work, he feels both joy and contentment that these efforts continue to make a difference in the lives of others.

“As you get older and look back on how you’ve spent your time, you do reflect on whether you’ve made wise choices. Developing FreeLegalAnswers was one of the wisest choices I’ve ever made, and it continues to bring great joy to our army of volunteers.” ■