Francis B. Burch Jr. '74

Francis B. (Frank) Burch Jr. '74 is a somewhat reluctant subject. He doesn’t expect recognition for what he does, for what he has accomplished, or for the time and energy he commits to making good things happen for his city, his law firm, his law school, his other charitable commitments, and for those around him. But there is much here, and it can’t be kept under wraps for long. A Baltimore native, Burch calls himself a business trial lawyer. Upon graduation, he started at Piper & Marbury, L.L.P. as a product liability defense lawyer. After six or so successful years, then-Chairman of the firm, Andre Brewster, asked Burch to move into the growing field of business-to-business and shareholder-to-business disputes. He never looked back. For Burch, the practice of law has been one exciting and interesting adventure after another.

“When I first started with the firm, I quickly found myself in front of judges and juries in state and federal trial and appellate courts,” says Burch. “I loved it. I was working right away with sophisticated clients, on interesting matters, and many of the cases were getting tried and appealed. I’ve been blessed with great opportunities from the beginning of my career.”

Burch’s early product liability trial experience has greatly influenced his subsequent practice. He likes the courtroom, and the time he has spent there has served him well. He has become one of Baltimore’s most successful lawyers and in 1994 became Chairman of Piper & Marbury, Maryland’s largest

By Jonathan F. Saxton '91

For Burch, the problem with much business litigation is that it's process-driven, not solution-driven: "The way we've tried to differentiate ourselves from some of our competitors is by demonstrating that resolving complex problems need not entail long, drawn-out, scorched-earth litigation. Our experience is that you can reduce the pain and get to the crux of the matter if your practice is solution-oriented," Burch explains. "We expect and train our lawyers to be creative, to be problem solvers, not problem makers. It seems so obvious and yet there are many lawyers who seem to take pride in their ability to create conflict or to complicate. On the other hand, there seem to be many who let the process run them. We do it differently, both in our litigation and transactional practices. The mantra is 'fix the problem.'"

It's hard to argue with success. Over the last several years, when other firms downsized, or in some cases disintegrated, Piper & Marbury has grown steadily. While its Baltimore office remains its largest, its Washington office now boasts nearly 100 lawyers, its New York office nearly 60, and its Philadelphia office, 15. Its practice is increasingly national and international in scope, as reflected in the steady growth of both its revenue and its net income.

Burch is passionate about the School of Law and what he knows to be its excellent faculty and programs. A 1974 graduate (with honors, Order of the Coif), he talks almost reverently about the faculty he encountered there. "The education was first-rate. I still use the knowledge I gained from Bill Reynolds, Max Eisenberg, Russell Reno, John and Alice Brumbaugh, Garrett Power, Dick Falcon, and others—all thoughtful, dedicated, effective teachers. What they taught stuck with you, came together and has held together through the years. I can't say enough about the faculty and the quality of the academic program."

And, he is quick to point out, his education was virtually cost free: "The law school was the best bargain I will ever find. It seemed to be the free lunch you aren't supposed to get in life."

As chairman of the Board of Visitors, but even more as a concerned alumnus, Burch is dedicated to building new facilities for the School of Law. He sees the law school as one of the city's, and the state's, best assets. "We're very fortunate to have a great faculty and a strong student body, and to have a dean who has the vision, energy and intelligence to keep the school moving in the right direction. Now we need a facility of commensurate quality, and we are counting on substantial support from those of us who were given so much, for so little, by the institution."

Asked what advice he would give to prospective or current law students, Burch says, "Look at law school as a wonderful opportunity to learn about the law and to acquire a set of skills that you can use throughout your life to be successful in virtually any endeavor. Aside from the knowledge imparted, you learn how to develop intellectual discipline and critical thinking skills. And at Maryland you'll also learn something about public service. There are no better lessons learned, and no better place to learn them."

In addition to his commitments to the law school, Burch is broadly and deeply engaged in other venues that enable him to serve the communities and interests to which he is dedicated. Among other things, he is a member of the Board of Trustees of Johns Hopkins Medicine, The Greater Baltimore Committee, Dome Corporation, Calvert School, and Western Maryland College, and he chairs the Board of The Leadership. He is a Fellow of the American College of Trial Lawyers and of both the American and Maryland Bar Foundations and for many years has earned a listing in The Best Lawyers in America.1 He and his wife Mary Ann are the proud parents of three "great, well-rounded" young adults (no reluctance there): a daughter, Sara, who is a junior at Dartmouth, and two sons, Bill and Michael, a senior and a freshman, respectively, at McDonogh School.

Burch is a very successful, creative problem solver. The School of Law is fortunate to have such a distinguished alumnus as an asset, helping us build our reputation, facilities and vision for the 21st century.

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