Chapter Award Recipients

Robert S. Barnett

Robert S. Barnett, Tax Partner at Capell Barnett Matalon & Schoenfeld LLP, has been earning the respect and admiration of his colleagues for many years, and precisely because of that, he has now earned the prestigious NYSSCPA Distinguished Service Award. Per the NYSSCPA, this award officially "recognizes CPAs who have distinguished themselves as Society leaders and have given outstanding service to the Society and the profession through dedicated service, publications, public service and other activities."

Mr. Barnett is absolutely thrilled by the honor. "I'm really very humbled because I think the recognition from my peers and friends, and people I've been working with for so long is a very moving thing; it really means a lot," says Mr. Barnett. "It's just very personally gratifying and I'm very touched. I know that some of the folks who have gone before have made the Society very rich and so for me to receive this award is inspiring. I've been a member of the Society really since graduating college, so it's been a very important part of my life. It truly means a lot."

Mr. Barnett has served as both president and as an executive board member of the Nassau Chapter of the New York State Society of CPAs, and has co-chaired the Taxation Committee for years. Despite his incredibly busy schedule, Barnett finds the time to give back, inform and teach his fellow CPAs.

Specifically, he speaks at NYSSCPA's all-day tax seminars, Estate & Financial Planning seminars and on other CPE courses at both the chapter and state level. "He is always volunteering his time and is always willing to help a fellow practitioner," recounts a fellow member.

The topics he covers helps those in his profession to broach the interconnectedness of things. Barnett explains: "I like to speak about current topics that interact in taxation. A lot of my practice revolves around estate and trust issues. What I find most fascinating is when the estate and legal issues start coming together and juxtapose with tax issues. It shows how intertwined the disciplines are and how interconnected the knowledge has to be."

"What you realize," he continues, "is that in this era of specialization, there is a real importance in having a breadth of experience and I think that to some extent that is being lost today in the hyper-technicality of the profession. A perfect example of that is seen in the estate and S corporation areas; there are a lot of pitfalls and danger signs and unless you have that overall knowledge, in both areas, there are things that can be readily missed. I enjoy speaking about the areas where lines and quadrants meet, so these are the areas that most attract my attention."

The reasons for his volunteering have changed throughout the years: "You know, it's evolved," Barnett muses. "I think that I personally get a lot of satisfaction from it, in the growth of my practice, and a lot of what I try to do is because of the people I work with who help me a lot in what I do. I have very practical and usable information to share and so I try to help them avoid some of the issues they could face, and teach them how to use their skills and acquire focus. I get a lot of pleasure in that."

He admits that help is time-consuming, but definitely worth it. "It does take a lot of time, commitment and effort but when it's something you really enjoy doing, you don't look at it that way. I've found that the members from so many of the committees, especially at the COAP, are extremely generous with their time as well, so I don't look at it as a sacrifice or a struggle. A lot of us do it very gladly.

"Everyone in my Taxation Committee is so committed and knowledgeable. When I look back on the strength of the NY State Society, it's a tremendous source of lifeblood, and the people in the committees are all so involved in the day-to-day and important events that affect the practitioners in these areas; I'm just amazed in how much information they provide. They are meeting the needs of our membership at large, so it truly is a large group that has this deep commitment to the Society."

In addition to his work at the NYSSCPA, Barnett's philanthropy includes board membership at the Long Island Community Foundation, where he has donated his time for more than 25 years. He also works with the Nassau Academy of Law, where he helps in their educational promotions and conferences. With the Academy, he's become very involved in teaching. "Nothing fires me up better than a well-attended and much-enjoyed conference. I want people to get great information at a low price."

When thinking about where the NextGeneration of CPAs fits into the ever-changing world of taxation, Barnett points out his own strengths AND his weaknesses. "For those that know me, technology and I do not get along," he laughs. "Except for my tax programs, I am virtually a neophyte, but I do understand the needs of work and family balance and the state our young practitioners are in. I think that the answers are in front of us and very achievable." He sees the value in the increasing efficiency of technologies that allow everyone to work "virtually" but he also sees the downsides.

"I think that for young practitioners it's also important to meet leaders in their field. That always drove me to meetings. I was always that young person in the back of the room in awe, thinking, 'Wow, they have so much information.'

"I'd come away from meetings with a tremendous view of the committee members and always thought how important it was to meet them and know them as individuals; I saw the true benefit of it. I understand today there is less of a need to meet 'in the flesh,' so to speak. Now we work in more technical ways, and that's okay. "

Barnett grew up in a simpler time on Long Island, in the '50s and '60s. "I think it was a great time and place to grow up—you had a lot of friends and neighbors all around you. Every house had three kids and they were all your friends. It was a very close-knit community." His parents were great inspirations for him as well. Barnett's father was a businessman, and Barnett was extremely interested in business through watching him, and he worked with his father all through college. "My mother was the more studious person, the bookworm," he muses, "so I got that from her. It was a great combination, I think."

Mr. Barnett attended Hofstra as an undergraduate but was an evening student, working his way through school and starting a family. "The first two courses I took were Business Law and Accounting 101," he remembers. "I was interested in business and thought, Why not take both? I had a professor who was extremely interesting—he was a professor and a lawyer. I'm sure I was the youngest in the class; he picked on me a lot and I'm sure I learned a lot. I got a great education at Hofstra and was very prepared for the professional world because of it.

"Hofstra and all of the local schools are very important in the accounting community. Hofstra, Adelphi, LIU…they all have wonderful accounting programs. Also, I see and meet people all the time who went to the same schools, and we all had the same professors—it's a nice thing to kind of compare notes."

At C.W. Post, Barnett earned his master's degree in taxation, before attending law school at Fordham, where he received his Juris Doctor degree. Finally, his school days were over. "I decided not to attend medical school," he jokes.

Mr. Barnett began his prestigious career at the influential J.K. Lasser, which later merged into Touche Ross, one of the "Big 8." Now, he specializes in estate and business succession planning as well as general business tax and financial succession, and structuring. On a day-to-day basis, he fields questions regarding partnership on the law side and from CPAs in the taxation arena. In addition, his firm works on areas of classification changes and debt reduction.

"A lot of times, CPA firms are our clients," says Barnett. "And sometimes it's another lawyer who reaches out to me. I guess that's one of the benefits of my lecturing and involvement in the Society. For young CPAs, I would say attending meetings is so important because people get to know you and learn to have confidence in you, because they've met you and worked things out with you. Later, if issues arise that they need help with, they'll consider you. That is why, for young CPAs, I recommend that they come and get to know others in their field."

It's ironic though, that he finds lecturing to be more comfortable than networking. "I always found lecturing to be comfortable because it's something you can prepare for. I guess you can do role modeling to prepare for one-on-one interactions. But if you put me in the middle of a crowd, I get nervous. Put me in front of hundreds of people and I'm great."

This is definitely the opposite feeling that most experience when speaking in front of large crowds. Barnett explains it this way: "I think it's because I'm so confident in what I want to impart. I'm thinking about what I want to share, whether I want to make a joke, or provide examples in common usage for a complex problem, so I never get nervous. Put me in a quiet dinner party and I'm mortified."

Going forward, Barnett feels that the Society would benefit from interacting with other societies, including the Bar Association. "These mutual events will attract both lawyers and CPAs. This way, we can attract professionals who will get to know more about what the State Society can do. It seems to me that the interconnectedness of groups is becoming more common. There are different models of interaction now and people are working to find that right balance."

And this ties in perfectly with his own future plans. "I'm going to be increasing my time spent writing and lecturing, and in mentoring my own staff. I truly love lecturing and writing, so I'd like to see where I can take that. But what do they say? Man plans and God laughs."