Vincent J. Chisholm was born in Providence in June of 1929, just a few months before the stock market crash and the commencement of the Great Depression. Though he was invited to leave LaSalle Academy during his sophomore year, and spent only one subsequent year at Mt. Pleasant High School, industrious, then seventeen-year-old Chisholm joined the Air Force in 1946. After serving in Alaska and the Aleutian Islands, he returned to Rhode Island to attend the University of Rhode Island, where he began studying accounting. After two years, he left URI to pursue a law degree from Boston University. He graduated from BU in 1954, “broke but [without]…any bills[,]” completed a six-month clerkship with the East Side firm, Zietz & Sonkin, and gained admission to the Rhode Island Bar the same year. He practiced with notables like Eddie Friedman, Congressman Fernand St. Germain, and Leonard Decof, and recounts John Keenan, Joe Kelly, and John Dolan as erstwhile, skilled opponents. He currently serves of counsel at Chisholm Chisholm & Kilpatrick, where he practices with his son, Robert. He received one of the Rhode Island Bar Association’s most prestigious honors, the Ralph P. Semonoff Award for Professionalism in 2008. In support of his nomination for this accolade, a fellow lawyer wrote: “He achieved extraordinary results in these very difficult cases, due, in large part, to his considerable legal skills, his high level of preparation, his perseverance and, perhaps most significantly, his charm and integrity.”

Excerpts from our conversation with this 59-year bar veteran follow.

What skills or qualities of yours would you attribute to your success and long-standing career as an attorney? When I first started practicing with Eddie Friedman, he was a big, tall handsome fellow with a bellowing voice, so I started to behave in the same fashion. But I soon realized that was not the right way to go. When I calmed down, I did much better. So I try to be patient, and I try to look at the clients attentively, without any distraction, and I think that helps. When they see you’re looking right at them, not thinking of anything else but them, that counts a lot.

What is the best advice that you’ve ever received? Judge Conlon, who used to be in the Supreme Court, told me one day, “You want to be a successful lawyer?” I said, “Sure.” He says, “If you get a good case, try it, don’t settle it.” I don’t entirely agree with that, but it can help.

What has been one of the biggest challenges or obstacles over the course of your legal career? What was kind of difficult for me was doing a lot of medical research, but I had some help. We didn’t have any medical school in Rhode Island, and Brown didn’t have their science building over there. As a result, I’d go up to Boston to the Harvard Medical School and study up there. And it paid off. It was a lot of work, but I found medical malpractice exciting, but very, very difficult. What helped me in addition was my wife was a registered nurse, and, in that capacity, she also did some medical research for grants and stuff like that. That helped me a great deal. But I think that was the toughest thing, to analyze these cases to see what they had and what they didn’t have.

What challenges do you foresee for newer members of the Bar? Apart from the overwhelming expense of becoming a lawyer? It seems to me at the present time the prospects are not that promising. I expect when we get over this recession and business picks up more, it will be better.

What advice would you give to newer members of the Bar? Number one, behave. Dress well, it’s important. And instead of standing around, if you don’t have a client with you, go in the courtroom and listen to what the judges are saying, whatever the issue may be. You never know how much you can learn just by keeping your ears open and paying attention. Also, if you give your client your absolute, undivided attention, they have confidence that you’re really interested in doing the right job. And, obviously, be courteous with them.

Would you do it all again? Overall, I have and had a pretty good life.

Attorney Chisholm has both a good life and a distinguished career. His work ethic and attentiveness to his clients are things that we should all strive to emulate.