

FILED
 APR 26 2005
 HEARING OFFICER OF THE
 SUPREME COURT OF ARIZONA
 BY *Williams*

**BEFORE A HEARING OFFICER
 OF THE SUPREME COURT OF ARIZONA**

IN THE MATTER OF A MEMBER)	No. 03-2099
OF THE STATE BAR OF ARIZONA,)	
)	
STEVEN D. COPPLE,)	
Bar No. 002351)	
)	HEARING OFFICER'S REPORT
RESPONDENT.)	
)	

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The State Bar filed a Complaint on November 29, 2004. Respondent filed an Answer on January 10, 2005. The State Bar filed a Motion to Amend Complaint, which was granted. The State Bar filed an Amended Complaint on February 18, 2005. The Settlement Officer conducted a settlement conference on February 18, 2005. The parties filed a Tender of Admissions and Agreement for Discipline by Consent and a Joint Memorandum in Support of Agreement for Discipline by Consent on March 23, 2005. A telephonic conference regarding the consent documents was held on March 29, 2005. At the request of this Hearing Officer the parties filed an Amended Tender of Admissions and Agreement for Discipline by Consent (Amended Tender) and a Joint Memorandum in Support of Agreement for Discipline by Consent (Amended Joint Memo) on April 6, 2005.

1 **FINDINGS OF FACT**

2 1. At all times relevant, Respondent was an attorney licensed to practice
3 law in the State of Arizona, having been admitted to practice in Arizona on
4 September 20, 1969.
5

6 2. Beginning in the early 1990's until in or about August 2003,
7 Respondent and Richard Grand ("Mr. Grand") had a limited co-counsel
8 arrangement wherein they maintained separate law offices but worked jointly on
9 certain cases where they were jointly retained by the clients ("Limited Co-
10 Counsel Relationship").
11

12 3. The Limited Co-Counsel Relationship called for Respondent to
13 provide the client trust account, because at that time Mr. Grand did not have such
14 an account, and to conduct much of the litigation involved in the cases, while Mr.
15 Grand provided his name recognition, experience and collaboration.
16

17 4. In or about July 2003, Respondent entered a residential treatment
18 center ("RTC") to participate in a 28-day program for rehabilitation regarding his
19 substance abuse problem.
20

21 5. Prior to Respondent's admittance to the RTC, Mr. Grand was
22 unaware of Respondent's substance abuse problem. Respondent had authority to
23 act as Mr. Grand's agent and to sign documents, including pleadings and
24 agreements on his behalf.
25

1 6. After Respondent's admittance to the RTC, but before his discharge,
2 Respondent and Mr. Grand had one or more conversations, by telephone and/or in
3 person, about the future of their professional relationship.
4

5 7. Upon his release from the RTC, Respondent and Mr. Grand resumed
6 the Limited Co-Counsel Relationship.

7 8. After Respondent's release from the RTC a new trust account was
8 opened for use in the co-counsel cases handled by Respondent and Mr. Grand.
9 The new trust account required two signatures for disbursement of funds, that of
10 either Respondent or one of his two partners, and that of either Mr. Grand or Mr.
11 Grand's attorney, Michael Meehan on behalf of Mr. Grand.
12

13 9. In or about mid-August 2003, a decision was made to wind-down
14 and terminate the Limited Co-Counsel Relationship.
15

16 10. Disputes arose between Respondent and Mr. Grand during the period
17 they were winding down and terminating the Limited Co-Counsel Relationship.
18

19 11. In or about September 2003, Respondent, with the client's
20 authorization, reached a verbal agreement to settle one of his and Mr. Grand's co-
21 counsel cases, *Swinford v. Nielson Trucking* ("Swinford matter") for the
22 defendant's \$1 million liability insurance policy limits.
23

24 12. Respondent instructed Andrew Jacobs ("Mr. Jacobs"), opposing
25 counsel in the *Swinford* matter, that the settlement check should be made payable

1 to "Robert Swinford and Steven Copple, his attorney" and provided the taxpayer
2 ID number of the new Copple/Grand trust account.

3
4 13. After Mr. Jacobs and Respondent, on behalf of himself and Mr.
5 Grand, reached an agreement regarding the terms of the release and settlement
6 agreement ("agreement"), Mr. Jacobs' office prepared the agreement in writing
7 and transmitted it to Respondent with a request that Respondent obtain the
8 necessary signatures.

9
10 14. Respondent signed the "Approved as to Form" line of the agreement
11 on behalf of Mr. Grand pursuant to prior practice, obtained the client's notarized
12 signature, and sent the agreement back to Mr. Jacobs.

13
14 15. At the same time as he sent the agreement, Mr. Jacobs also sent
15 Respondent a Stipulation for Dismissal with Prejudice ("stipulation") that
16 contained a line each for Mr. Grand's and Respondent's signatures.

17
18 16. Respondent edited the stipulation and had it retyped with the same
19 signature block that had been used on all the pleadings in the case with Mr.
20 Grand's knowledge. The signature block had one line for Respondent to sign on
21 behalf of both Respondent's firm and Mr. Grand. Respondent signed the revised
22 document on behalf of both Mr. Grand and himself and, on or about November
23 12, 2003, sent it to Mr. Jacobs along with the signed agreement.
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1 behalf without ascertaining that he still had the authority to do so, he negligently
2 violated Rule 42, Ariz. R. S. Ct., specifically, ER 8.4(d).

3
4 The State Bar conditionally agrees, for purposes of this agreement only, to
5 dismiss the alleged violations of ERs 4.1 and 8.4(a), (b) and (c), Rule 42, Ariz. R.
6 S. Ct., The State Bar had alleged in the complaint the following allegations:

7 1. "That in or about mid-August 2003 Respondent was informed by
8 Mr. Grand that, among other things, he no longer had authority to sign for
9 Respondent." The State Bar conditionally admits, for purposes of this agreement
10 only, that it would be unable to prove this allegation by clear and convincing
11 evidence as there is no documentation to support it and the proof would be
12 subject to a credibility assessment by a Hearing Officer.

13
14 2. "Unbeknownst to Mr. Grand, Respondent forged Mr. Grand's signature
15 on the agreement, signing the agreement "Richard D. Grand" and not "Steven D.
16 Copple *for* Richard D. Grand" and sent it back to Mr. Jacobs." The State Bar
17 conditionally admits, for purposes of this agreement only, that it would not be
18 able to prove this allegation of the equivalent of an intentional forgery by clear
19 and convincing evidence in light of Respondent's anticipated testimony that he
20 had signed the document in accord with prior practice and that Mr. Grand was
21 aware of the settlement and its terms.
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1 3. "In the course of representing a client, Respondent knowingly made a
2 false statement of material fact or law to a third person; or failed to disclose a
3 material fact when disclosure was necessary to avoid assisting a criminal or
4 fraudulent act, in violation of ER 4.1." The State Bar conditionally admits, for
5 purposes of this agreement only, that it would be unable prove this by clear and
6 convincing evidence in light of Respondent's anticipated testimony that he was
7 acting in accordance with long-standing practice approved by Mr. Grand and
8 without the intent to knowingly made a false statement or fail to disclose a
9 material fact and in light of documentation supporting such testimony.
10

11
12 4. "Respondent violated or attempted to violate the Rules of Professional
13 Conduct, knowingly assisted or induced another to do so, or did so through the
14 acts of another, in violation of ER 8.4(a)." The State Bar conditionally admits,
15 for purposes of this agreement only, that it could not prove this violation by clear
16 and convincing evidence.
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18
19 5. "Respondent committed a criminal act that reflects adversely on the
20 lawyer's honesty, trustworthiness or fitness as a lawyer in other respects, in
21 violation of ER 8.4(b)." The State Bar conditionally admits, for purposes of this
22 agreement only, that it would be unable to prove this violation by clear and
23 convincing evidence in light of Respondent's anticipated testimony that he was
24 acting with Mr. Grand's authority and in accordance with prior practice and as
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1 there is no documentation to controvert Respondent's testimony and what
2 documentation there is tends to support Respondent's testimony.

3
4 6. "Respondent engaged in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit or
5 misrepresentation, in violation of ER 8.4(c)." The State Bar conditionally admits,
6 for purposes of this agreement only, that it could not prove that Respondent had
7 the requisite intent by clear and convincing evidence.

8 ABA STANDARDS

9
10 The *ABA Standards* list the following factors to consider in imposing the
11 appropriate sanction: (1) the duty violated, (2) the lawyer's mental state, (3) the
12 actual or potential injury caused by the lawyer's misconduct, and (4) the
13 existence of aggravating or mitigating circumstances. *ABA Standard 3.0*.

14
15 A review of *ABA Standard 6.0* (Violations of Duties Owed to the Legal
16 System) indicates that admonition (informal reprimand in Arizona) is the
17 presumptive sanction for Respondent's conduct. *Standard 6.14* specifically
18 provides:
19

20 Admonition (informal reprimand in Arizona) is generally
21 appropriate when a lawyer engages in an isolated instance of
22 neglect in determining whether submitted statements or
23 documents are false or in failing to disclose material
24 information upon learning of its falsity, and causes little or
25 no actual or potential injury to a party, or causes little or no
adverse or potentially adverse effect on the legal proceeding.

1 Respondent conditionally admits that this was an isolated instance of
2 negligently failing to ascertain, given the dissolution of the limited co-counsel
3 relationship, whether or not he still had the authority to sign certain legal
4 documents on behalf of Richard Grand while acting as co-counsel in the *Swinford*
5 matter. Respondent conditionally admits that his conduct violated Rule 42, Ariz.
6 R. S. Ct., specifically ER 8.4(d) in that his conduct caused potential, but not
7 actual, harm to the legal proceeding.
8
9

10 AGGRAVATING AND MITIGATING FACTORS

11 This Hearing Officer then considered aggravating and mitigating factors in
12 this case, pursuant to *Standards* 9.22 and 9.32, respectively.
13

14 This Hearing Officer agrees with the parties that one aggravating factor
15 applies and should be considered in this matter:

16 (i) substantial experience in the practice of law.¹
17

18 This Hearing Officer agrees with the parties that four factors are present in
19 mitigation:

20 (a) absence of a prior disciplinary record.
21
22

23
24 ¹ The aggravating factor of substantial experience in the practice of law is often offset by the
25 corresponding factor of an unblemished disciplinary record during the same time period.
Matter of Shannon, 179. Ariz. 52, 68 (1994).

1 (b) absence of a dishonest or selfish motive: Respondent affirmatively
2 states, and the State Bar conditionally admits, for purposes of this agreement that
3 there is no evidence that Respondent signed Mr. Grand's name in an attempt to
4 enrich himself or deprive Mr. Grand of any legal fees to which Mr. Grand had a
5 legitimate claim.
6

7 (d) timely good faith effort to make restitution or to rectify consequences of
8 misconduct: Respondent, upon learning that Mr. Grand wanted to sign the
9 *Swinford* stipulation to dismiss, immediately transmitted the release/settlement
10 agreement to Mr. Grand to sign in order to correct any misunderstanding
11 concerning the "approved as to form" signature.
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13

14 In total, the mitigation in this case indicates that the questioned conduct is
15 isolated in an otherwise successful and unblemished career. In addition, the
16 Respondent affirmatively states, and the State Bar conditionally admits, that the
17 allegations in this matter arise out of the dissolution of a long-term limited co-
18 counsel association between Richard Grand and Respondent. The disassociation
19 has engendered at least two civil lawsuits (one over the proprietary interest in
20 computer tapes, one over three cases unrelated to this matter). The Respondent
21 affirmatively asserts, and the State Bar conditionally admits, that the facts
22 indicate that Respondent believed in good faith that he had authority to sign Mr.
23 Grand's name, in a manner consistent with the two lawyers' conduct over the
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1 preceding nine years of association. (Indeed, Respondent asserts and the State
2 Bar conditionally does not dispute that Mr. Grand did not inform Respondent in
3 advance that he withdrew Mr. Copple's authority to sign on Mr. Grand's name
4 on his behalf in all matters.) However, in light of the disassociation,
5 Respondent admits that he was negligent in not verifying whether he still had
6 such authority.
7

8 PROPORTIONALITY REVIEW

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10 To have an effective system of professional sanctions, there must be
11 internal consistency, and it is appropriate to examine sanctions imposed in cases
12 that are factually similar. In re Shannon, 179 Ariz. 52, 71, 876 P.2d 548, 567
13 (1994), (quoting In re Wines, 135 Ariz. 203, 207 (1983)). However, the
14 discipline in each case must be tailored to the individual case, as neither
15 perfection nor absolute uniformity can be achieved. Matter of Riley, 142 Ariz.
16 604, 615 (1984).
17

18
19 Counsel were unable to find cases with facts identical to the ones in the
20 instant case. Therefore, counsel reviewed other cases in which a violation of
21 ER 8.4(d) was found to determine a baseline for proportionality purposes. In *In*
22 *re Nalabandian*, SB-04-0153-D, Disciplinary Commission No. 01-1792, the
23 State Bar charged Nalabandian with a violation of ER 8.4(d), Rule 42,
24 Ariz.R.S.Ct., after he conditionally admitted to leaving the scene of a fatal
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1 accident with the driver, another attorney, of the vehicle in which he was a
2 passenger. Nalabandian also conditionally admitted that because he and the
3 driver left the scene and walked for hours, the State was unable to determine
4 conclusively whether the driver was intoxicated at the time of the accident. The
5 Disciplinary Commission accepted the Agreement for Discipline by Consent
6 and censured Nalabandian, who by that time was an inactive member of the
7 State Bar of Arizona residing out-of-state, for his violation of conduct
8 prejudicial to the administration of justice. Bar counsel and Respondent contend
9 that Nalabandian's conduct merited a more severe sanction than appropriate in
10 this case as his conduct actually impeded an investigation and caused harm.
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14 In *In re Miranda*, 2002 Ariz. LEXIS 91 (2002), the Disciplinary
15 Commission recommended that Miranda be censured and placed on probation
16 for a period of six months after the hearing officer found that Miranda's conduct
17 violated ERs 3.3, 8.1, 8.4(c) and (d), Rule 42, Ariz. R. S. Ct. as well as Rule
18 52(h) and (i)², Ariz. R. S. Ct. Regarding the violation of ER 8.4(d), the hearing
19 officer concluded that Miranda engaged in conduct prejudicial to the
20 administration of justice when she signed pleadings on behalf of her client, then
21 notarized the same pleadings as if the client had signed them herself. The
22 hearing officer also found that, although Miranda knowingly violated her duty to
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² Re-numbered Rule 53 (f) and (d), respectively, effective December 1, 2003.

1 her clients, the public and the legal system causing potential injury, there was no
2 finding of actual harm. In addition to the fact that other ERs were violated,
3 these facts differ from the instant case as the documents were notarized and that
4 action violated the rules pertaining to the notarizing of documents as well as the
5 ethical rules. Moreover, in this case, Respondent had authority to sign
6 documents on Mr. Grand's behalf for approximately nine years. The facts
7 indicate he believed in good faith that he still had such authority when he signed
8 for Mr. Grand indicating his approval "as to form" a document that
9 memorialized a settlement that Mr. Grand had approved.
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12 In *In Re St. George*, 1998 Ariz. Lexis 14 (1998), St. George conditionally
13 admitted to a violation of ER 8.4(d), Rule 42, Ariz.R.S.Ct., when he negligently
14 enabled a municipal court judge to commit theft against the City of Tempe. St.
15 George was criminally charged with money laundering, and pled guilty to one
16 count of theft. St. George was sentenced to criminal probation, community
17 service and restitution and, upon a finding by the trial court that St. George
18 lacked any specific criminal intent, the judge designated the offense as a Class 1
19 misdemeanor. The Disciplinary Commission found that a censure was
20 appropriate given St. George's acceptance of responsibility for his actions, and
21 acknowledgment that his negligent conduct was below the ethical standards
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1 required of an attorney. As in the cases above, the facts of *St. George* are far
2 more aggravated than the facts in the instant case.

3
4 In *In Re Valenzuela*, SB-00-0011-D, the State Bar charged Valenzuela
5 with violations of ER 4.1(a) and 8.4(c), Ariz.R.S.Ct. Valenzuela, who had
6 power of attorney to settle a personal injury case on behalf of his client, signed
7 his client's name to a release, as well as his client's name along with his name
8 on the settlement agreement draft. Valenzuela then allowed a notary public to
9 notarize the release, which falsely stated that the client had personally appeared
10 before the notary for signature. Finding that Respondent voluntarily disclosed
11 to bar counsel that he had in fact signed his client's name to the settlement draft
12 and release, that the client had provided a power of attorney in writing and that
13 Valenzuela did not intend to cause any harm to his client, the Disciplinary
14 Commission recommended acceptance of a censure and payment of costs.
15 While this case is more factually similar to the instant case, the fact that the
16 release was falsely notarized due to the actions of the attorney make the
17 transgressions in *Valenzuela* more serious than in the instant case. The long
18 history of Respondent's authority to sign on Mr. Grand's behalf, the approval of
19 the legal document only "as to form," and the fact that the client approved the
20 settlement and signed on his own behalf are facts that further distinguish this
21 case from *Valenzuela*.
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1 In *In Re Huser*, 2001 Ariz. Lexis 8 (2001), Huser was found to have
2 negligently entered an appearance, filed an answer, and signed a stipulation of
3 behalf of an insured without his knowledge or consent. Huser did not have
4 authorization to represent the insured and did not have any contact with the
5 insured. In addition to other ethical violations, Huser also failed to withdraw
6 from the case once he realized that the insured could not be located and Huser
7 also failed to disclose this information. Huser was never in possession of a
8 power-of-attorney and never had permission to sign any documents; however,
9 the Commission concluded that a censure with probation and payment of costs
10 was an appropriate sanction since a suspension was not necessary in order to
11 protect the public. In comparison to the instant case, Huser had never had
12 authority to sign the documents whereas Respondent in this instant matter had
13 had long-standing authority to sign on Mr. Grand's behalf. In addition, there is
14 no issue in this case regarding Respondent's authority to act on the client's
15 behalf.

16 In disciplinary proceedings, a respondent's mental state can both
17 determine whether an ethical violation occurs and affect the appropriate
18 discipline for a violation. *In Re Clark*, 207 Ariz. 414, 417, 87 P.3d 827,
19 830(2004). The State Bar charged Clark with conduct involving dishonesty,
20 fraud, deceit or misrepresentation and conduct prejudicial to the administration

1 of justice, in violation of ERs 8.4(c) and 8.4(d), Rule 42, Ariz.R.S.Ct. This
2 hearing officer found that Clark “negligently violated a duty to the courts and to
3 his former client” but that “his mental state did not demonstrate a state of mind
4 of maliciousness or avarice”. *Id.* at 416, 829. Due to the hearing officer’s
5 findings that Clark’s conduct was merely “negligent”, and the rule requires a
6 violation to be “knowing or intentional”, the Supreme Court vacated the
7 violation of ER 8.4(c) and remanded the matter to the Disciplinary Commission
8 for appropriate discipline based solely on Clark’s violation of ER 8.4(d). The
9 Disciplinary Commission recommended that Clark be censured, placed on
10 probation and ordered to pay restitution.
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14 Here, as in *Clark*, there is no proof that Respondent’s failure to obtain Mr.
15 Grand’s consent prior to signing the *Swinford* documents demonstrates a “state
16 of mind of maliciousness or avarice” or that Respondent’s conduct was anything
17 more than negligent. If this matter went to hearing, Respondent would testify
18 that throughout their professional association he had authority to act as Mr.
19 Grand’s agent and to sign documents, including pleadings and agreements, on
20 his behalf without the need to first inform or obtain permission from Mr. Grand.
21 Respondent would also testify that, with respect to the *Swinford* matter, he was
22 simply conducting “business as usual” and following a practice that had been in
23 place throughout the litigation of the *Swinford* case. In addition, Respondent
24
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1 would testify that he did not intend to mislead the court or anyone regarding his
2 signing of Mr. Grand's name on the *Swinford* documents. Further, Clark had
3 engaged in multiple instances of conduct, had a negative history in his dealings
4 with the Bar and had been subject to prior discipline.

6 The State Bar conditionally admits, for purposes of this agreement, that it
7 would not be able to prove by clear and convincing evidence the alleged
8 violations of ERs 4.1, and 8.4(a), (b) and (c), Rule 42, Ariz.R.S.Ct. in light of
9 the anticipated testimony of Mr. Grand and Respondent. For purposes of this
10 agreement, the State Bar conditionally admits that the testimony would be
11 equally credible and therefore the State Bar could not carry its burden of proof.

14 As in the proportionality cases, Respondent's conduct involves one single
15 instance of negligent misconduct. These the above-cited cases evaluate
16 "knowing" versus "negligent" conduct and establish that the recommended
17 sanction is appropriate given the facts of this case. As discussed previously, in
18 the instant case the document was "approved as to form" only, was neither
19 notarized nor submitted to a tribunal and was signed pursuant to Respondent's,
20 albeit mistaken, belief that he had retained the authority to do so. Mr. Grand
21 ultimately signed substantively identical documents, and the settlement was
22 concluded without delay and without prejudice to the client or Mr. Grand. The
23 mitigating factors outweigh the aggravating factors and the proportionality
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1 analysis justifies the lesser sanction of probation, participation in MAP and
2 imposition of costs.

3
4 This agreement provides for a sanction that meets the goals of the
5 disciplinary system. The terms of this agreement serve to protect the public,
6 instill confidence in the public, deter other lawyers from similar conduct and
7 maintain the integrity of the bar. Given the specific facts of this case, it is
8 unlikely that such a violation will occur again.
9

10 RECOMMENDATION

11 The purpose of lawyer discipline is not to punish the lawyer, but to protect
12 the public and deter future misconduct. *In re Fioramonti*, 176 Ariz. 182, 187, 859
13 P.2d 1315, 1320 (1993). It is also the objective of lawyer discipline to protect the
14 public, the profession and the administration of justice. *In re Neville*, 147 Ariz.
15 106, 708 P.2d 1297 (1985). Yet another purpose is to instill public confidence in
16 the bar's integrity. *Matter of Horwitz*, 180 Ariz. 20, 29, 881 P.2d 352, 361
17 (1994).
18
19

20 In imposing discipline, it is appropriate to consider the facts of the case, the
21 American Bar Association's *Standards for Imposing Lawyer Sanctions*
22 ("*Standards*") and the proportionality of discipline imposed in analogous cases.
23
24 *Matter of Bowen*, 178 Ariz. 283, 286, 872 P.2d 1235, 1238 (1994).
25

4 Officer recommends acceptance of the terms of admissions and agreement for

5 Discipline by Consent and the Joint Memorandum in Support of Agreement for

6 Discipline by Consent providing for the following:

7 1. Respondent shall be placed on probation³ for a period of one year
8 effective upon the signing of the probation contract. The terms of probation are as
9 follows:
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11 a. Respondent shall contact the director of the State Bar's Member
12 Assistance Program (MAP) within 30 days of the final order in this matter.
13 Respondent shall submit to an evaluation by the director of MAP. The MAP
14 director shall develop a therapeutic contract stating the terms of treatment, if he
15 deems such a contract is appropriate. Bar Counsel will notify the Disciplinary
16 Clerk of the date on which the probation term begins.
17

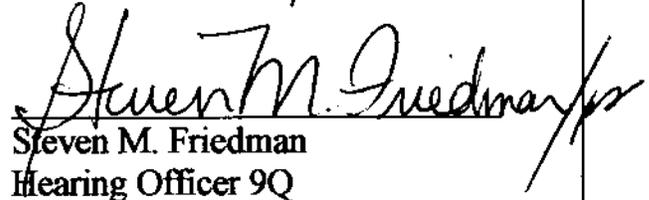
18 b. In the event that Respondent fails to comply with any of the
19 foregoing conditions, and the State Bar receives information, bar counsel shall
20 file with the Hearing Officer a Notice of Non-Compliance, pursuant to Rule
21 60(a)5, Ariz. R. S. Ct. The Hearing Officer shall conduct a hearing within thirty
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24 ³ Pursuant to Rule 56(e)1, if an agreement is accepted by the hearing officer it shall be final
25 unless the sanction to be imposed includes disbarment, suspension or censure; therefore, if
neither party files a notice of appeal pursuant to Rule 58(a), this Hearing Officer will file an
order of probation and costs.

1 days after receipt of said notice, to determine whether the terms of probation have
2 been violated and if an additional sanction should be imposed. In the event there is
3 an allegation that any of these terms have been violated, the burden of proof shall be
4 on the State Bar of Arizona to prove non-compliance by clear and convincing
5 evidence.
6

7 2. Respondent shall pay the costs and expenses incurred in this
8 disciplinary proceeding.
9

10 DATED this 26th day of April, 2005.

11 
12 Steven M. Friedman
13 Hearing Officer 9Q

14 Original filed with the Disciplinary Clerk
15 this 26th day of April, 2005.

16 Copy of the foregoing was mailed
17 this 26th day of April, 2005, to:

18 J. Scott Rhodes
19 Respondent's Counsel
20 *Jennings, Strouss & Salmon, P.L.C.*
21 201 East Washington Street, 11th Floor
22 Phoenix, AZ 85004-2385

23 Roberta L. Tepper
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by: P. Williams