

# A LAWYER'S MID-CAREER

## MEMOIR

By Marshall Jones

Two events recently happened to me that confirms "life comes at you fast."

First, I became a grandfather for the first time as my beloved oldest daughter gave birth to a healthy, beautiful granddaughter. A fantastic life experience, but you don't become a grandfather unless you've lived more than just a few years.

Second, I was asked to write my "memoir" for publication. My memoir? In addition to living a long time, isn't a prerequisite to writing and publishing a memoir either that I have been really successful or my accomplishments have been worthy of remembrance and record?

I know that whatever "success" I have had has been very modest in comparison to the "Super Lawyers" I read about in national publications. Nothing I have accomplished has changed society for the better, or garnered significant media attention. Some of my personal observations and experiences might be interesting to *SB Magazine's* readers. Remembering the old adage: "Write what you know," I'll share not only a short personal memoir, but also what I know about the Shreveport-Bossier legal community based upon my personal observations and experiences.

I knew in my early teens that I would become a lawyer. Because I was married and a father while still a teenager, I set my goal to become a lawyer earlier than my peers. I graduated from SMU in three years with good

grades and applied for admission to the LSU Law Center. Fortunately, I was accepted.

My 30-year-old memories of law school are still vivid. The Socratic method of teaching law (which focuses on giving students questions, not answers) was alive and well in the 1970s. My law professors were respected authority figures who intimidated you just enough to fire you up for the intellectual and emotional challenges of law school.

My law professors also taught me a new respect for the Boy Scouts' motto "Be prepared," as my professors seemed to probe me with questions often. I made the Law Review, which was a significant achievement for me, particularly when I knew law students smarter than I occupied nearby seats in every class. I actually enjoyed law school - much more than college - because, in my mind, my law courses began to connect me to the real world and prepare me to enter my chosen profession.

The cases we read for each law class were based on actual factual disputes; there were winners and losers in each case, with the outcome based upon the application of established legal precedent to a new set of facts. And, years later, I still understand that the rigors and discipline of law school taught me what I went to law school to learn: how to think analytically like a lawyer.

Being asked to assess my own legal career to date resulted in a realization of many things I have not ever considered. My early

years as a lawyer allowed me the opportunity to meet and interact with the best local lawyers of "The Greatest Generation" - lawyers like the late (Judge) Henry A. Politz (later the senior judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit), Sidney E. Cook, Charles L. Mayer and John M. Shuey; and the very much still alive and well federal appellate judge, Jacques L. Weiner, Jr., Robert Roberts, III and Bill Pesnell - all splendid lawyers, excellent in every respect, who treated all other lawyers with the utmost professionalism while advocating their clients' positions, and who were each involved as volunteers in various civic and charitable work.

In the 22 years since I assisted, at age 29, in the founding of our law firm, I have not had a cross word with any of my present or former law partners. While I often hear stories of conflict and dissension that might exist in other law firms, I look forward to coming to my law office every day and working with my smart, hardworking law partners. My law partners and I share the thought that the best prize life may have to offer a lawyer is the chance to "work hard at work worth doing." Our clients are confident we can assist them. And we do assist them - by managing the crisis, negotiating the transaction and trying the case.

And, despite having been involved in literally hundreds of business transactions and lawsuits - most of which fortunately involved the payment of a legal fee - my most fond

recollections involved matters where I earned no fee. Writing these words has prompted me to go through a desk drawer in which I keep personal mementos and photographs, and perhaps more than my share of letters from former clients who were appreciative of past legal work done well.

In my desk drawer I came across an old photograph from the early 1990s of 18-year-old beautiful, but physically disabled, Sarah Hoffman, sitting behind me in her wheelchair, along with other wheelchair bound students, as I argued before the Caddo Parish School Board that federal law required the School Board to provide handicap access to physically disabled children like young Sarah Hoffman.

While Sarah Hoffman is unfortunately now deceased, I can recall that this smart, brave child - born with no arms and unusable lower limbs - was probably the better advocate of the two of us. The Caddo Parish School Board heard our argument: "Has not life placed enough obstacles in the lives of these disabled children?" and, because of Sarah Hoffman's legal demands, ultimately agreed to provide handicapped access at various schools throughout Caddo Parish, at no small expense to the School Board.

I also came across a 1968 photograph of my childhood friend James Stewart and me, when we were seventh graders at Broadmoor Middle School. Many of you know James Stewart as Judge James E. Stewart of the Second Circuit Court of Appeals. Judge Stewart was my first friend who also happened to be black. The camaraderie of athletics and simply being boys of the same age brought us together at a time when racial tension was tearing our community apart. We became friends in the late 60s during the time of forced desegregation. I am proud that we have remained close friends for 40 years. Today Judge James Stewart and his older brother, Judge Carl E. Stewart, are leaders of our legal profession and our community, and both have dedicated their lives to helping people through the legal system.

This writing assignment also caused me to look at and read a few of my collection of letters and notes I've received over the years from former teachers, coaches, neighbors, friends, relatives and others who took the time to write and thank me for assisting them with different legal matters that were serious and important to them. In each and every case, the principal reward was knowing that people I care about had confidence I could

assist them, and I did assist them in their time of crisis and need.

Finally, this writing assignment and the passage of many years have caused me to realize that a real paradox exists with respect to the image of lawyers. The image of lawyers is a topic of great debate, and lawyers are the subject of criticism, both just and unjust. All too often, criticism read or heard about the legal profession includes the line from Shakespeare, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers." Shakespeare was wiser than those critics of the legal profession who borrow his words out of context. Shakespeare understood that the legal system serves as a foundation for an orderly society.

Just as a "dog bites man" story is seldom novel or interesting enough to warrant

Shreveport Bar Association's Young Lawyers Section provides legal advice to the public or the elderly in nursing homes or provides assistance to the Providence House? Why isn't it news when lawyers throughout the state organize their efforts to help provide legal assistance to Hurricane Katrina victims? Why isn't it news when my own law partner, John S. Odom, Jr. (now a retired USAFR JAG Corps Colonel) goes on active military duty to serve our county for almost two years while in his fifties?

Because these types of activities by lawyers happen all the time. As someone once said, "If the stars could only be seen once a year, everyone would turn out to see them." The media doesn't inform the general public about lawyers' public service

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significant media exposure, a story about the lawyer who seeks to serve the public interest is seldom considered newsworthy. Media coverage of the legal profession seems greatest only in the unusual case where a lawyer or judge has taken unjust advantage of his client or his position.

I realize that as long as our profession continues its tradition of defending the rights of unpopular persons, lawyers cannot expect great adulation from the public. I also realize that a negative image of lawyers may always exist to some degree because lawyers will continue to function in an adversary system that produces winners and losers; they will continue to litigate claims involving personal rights and liabilities, property or money; and they will continue to charge fees that even the "winners" sometimes feel are exorbitant.

It's news when a lawyer is jailed for contempt of court, or is charged with a crime. It's news when a lawyer is disbarred for misappropriating client funds. But it's news only because it happens so seldom.

Why isn't it news when the Shreveport Bar Association's "Pro Bono Project" lawyers provide free legal services to the poor, the elderly, veterans and the homeless? Why isn't it news when a member of the

efforts, because these efforts are a way of life for the vast majority of lawyers - they happen every day.

Perhaps someday the next generation of local lawyers will regard my professional contemporaries, like John Frazier, A. M. (Marty) Stroud, III, Larry Pettitte and David Taggart with the same high degree of admiration and respect I still hold for the late Judge Henry A. Politz, Sidney E. Cook and others.

As time passes quickly, I increasingly understand "success" to be less related to the financial rewards of my law practice and more related to being successful in my personal relationships with my wonderful wife and children, my family and friends, and my professional colleagues. Perhaps 20 years from now *SB Magazine* will again ask me to share my "memoirs" as a lawyer then in my 70s. While I will have participated in more transactions and more lawsuits, and may be even be "successful" by then - I will still understand that the best prize life has to offer a lawyer is the ability to work hard at work worth doing; and I will still be very thankful for my many blessings.

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