

Reflections: The Honorable William Wayne Justice

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Many of us here today have had the good fortune of serving as law clerks and staff for William Wayne Justice, who we knew as the Judge. For the 95 or so of us, Judge was not only our boss, our mentor, and our friend—he was our family. He and Sue welcomed us into their home and made us one of their own.

What first drew us in as clerks for Judge in Tyler, and then in Austin, was Judge's legendary commitment to the politically disenfranchised, his fidelity to the U.S. Constitution in the face of zealous political opposition, and his steadfast courage to wipe out bigotry and brutality from our political institutions.

As it turned out, what made clerking for Judge such a watershed event in our lives was the impact he had on our hearts and souls. Working for Judge was the opportunity in a lifetime to not only work for one of the greatest trial judges of all generations, but also to work for one of the greatest persons. While he did teach about the law at its best, he also taught us about how to be decent human beings.

This is true for everyone who had the good fortune to befriend this kind, generous, and loving man. People could not help but be drawn to Judge's warmth, his wit, his infectious laughter, and his joyful embrace of life's offerings, which included Texas barbecue, soul food restaurants that served oxtail and sweet potato pie, enormous unabridged dictionaries, and sports cars. Most importantly, he embraced and loved his family and his work as a lawyer and a judge—which is why even into his late 80s he was still hearing cases.

The word Judge Justice liked best to describe himself was “populist.” The word was emblazoned for many years on the coffee mug he used during our daily 8am ritual when staff would gather, oftentimes joined by judge's friends, to share East Texas folk lore, the latest UT football scores, and colorful memories from prior cases.

For Judge, at his core, being a populist meant embracing all people and treating them with equal respect and kindness. Whether he was presiding over a trial or greeting someone at the post office, he was genuinely interested in the lives of all he met. He embraced their struggles, their quirks, their humanity.

Judge introduced his clerks to these principles of populism from day one, during our clerkship interviews. These began with Judge picking us up at 6am from our Tyler motel and then driving us over to Dee's Diner, where we would watch his eyes light up as he exchanged greetings with the local wait staff.

Even as his fame as a judge grew, he remained the most modest man who was simply incapable of pretension; his attention always remained focused on others.

Judge's populism and compassion for humanity served as an anchor and moral compass in all that he ever did. As an attorney and a judge, it meant that our legal systems did not work unless they worked for everyone, rich or poor. As Judge once said, "The law ought to be decent, if nothing else. It ought to afford justice." He never once yielded from these principles. And that is why, in every single matter ever presented to his court, he demanded and vigorously pursued a just result.

During our clerkships, we quickly learned that the petition scrawled out on scrap paper by a pro se petitioner was to receive the same due attention as a carefully crafted case filed by a big law firm. Judge also made sure that all parties were treated with dignity in his courtroom, which meant sending clerks out to buy a button down shirt from the local Walmart for a defendant who could not afford one.

Nowhere was Judge's compassion for people more evident than when he was around his clerks' children—who were known as the "grand clerks." When you brought a grand clerk to visit Judge, you could easily find yourself deeply engaged in political discourse with Judge when he would suddenly break out into a game of peek-a-boo, flapping his hands over his eyes and yelling out, "Pee-Paw."

And then there is this delightful story about a grand clerk who was attending preschool and announced one day to her parents that she had learned the Pledge of Allegiance. When she attempted to recite this feat and got to last phrase, she cited quite eloquently, "with liberty, and Judge Justice for all."

If only the world could be so lucky to have Judge Justice for all.

Three years ago Judge Justice told a newspaper reporter, "I hope people remember me for someone trying to do justice. That's what I tried to do." We will indeed remember Judge for doing just that and so much more.

Even though we grieve over Judge Justice's passing and the loss of his friendship, we can find cause for joy in knowing that his impact on this country and our lives is everlasting. He has been an inspiration and role model to generations of lawyers to stay true to what we believe in, and how to do so with humility, passion, and grace. And we will do our best, although it will not be good enough, to teach our children and grandchildren to strive for the same high standards of integrity, commitment to justice, and respect for others.

We are so deeply grateful for William Wayne Justice.