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Wade H. McCree, Jr.: Student Perspectives

Professor McCree had an extraordinary impact on the student body as a teacher, mentor, and role model during the time that he taught at the law school. We have collected a group of anecdotes that illustrate his continued influence on the school and in our lives.

I. AS A TEACHER

All students enrolled in Professor McCree's classes were guaranteed a meaningful learning experience, one often much more demanding and challenging than they had expected. One assignment required students to write a sample United States Supreme Court brief and then lead a class discussion on the project. For guidance, Professor McCree invited students to borrow copies of actual Supreme Court briefs from the collection piled high on his bookshelves. Leafing through some of these briefs was interesting, but not quite as fascinating as Professor McCree's personal description of the particular case or the attorneys involved, especially those who had worked with him in the Solicitor General's office. Often, he would point out a particular attorney in one of the many pictures hanging on his office walls, giving the student a sense of the person behind the name on the Court papers. It was also during these impromptu discussions that a student would more fully understand Professor McCree's personal accomplishments — such as his pride in having hired more female attorneys during his tenure as Solicitor General than all of his predecessors combined.

Every student trusted, or soon learned to trust, that Professor McCree thoroughly knew the content of the work we submitted. Several of us learned never to rely too heavily on the form given in the sample briefs: Professor McCree inquired why so many of our cases were being appealed from the Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit (or, perish the thought, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, which was abolished in 1912). He used these simple blunders to impress upon us not just the correct names for the courts of appeals (and the correct circuits — only one of us actually had a case from the Fifth Circuit; we had just blindly copied from the brief), but also the importance of strict attention to detail.

Professor McCree required precise use of language. In one class discussion, Professor McCree remained silent as the students worked through several sections of a paper. Eventually, the teacher spoke, mentioning that he had a question about the wording in a particular sentence. While we searched through the body of the text for the source of his inquiry, he suggested a revised sentence located on the *first* page of the paper. He asked the authors what meaning they

wanted to convey in the sentence. All of us initially believed that the sentence was clear on its face. He persisted in his challenge of the language and suggested that one seemingly small word be changed. He was correct — with the change, the sentence was much more vivid and clear. We then continued our discussion, paying careful attention to each and every word. We are quite confident that several students will consider their use of even apparently clear and simple words much more carefully in the future, and will open their dictionaries on a more routine basis.

Professor McCree knew all of the arguments presented in each paper, as well as its obvious and not-so-obvious flaws. Before class, he read each paper several times. He also made it a point to actually read the cases cited, so that he could contribute even more to the discussion. Professor McCree listened attentively to each class member and believed that everyone made valuable contributions. If someone was unfamiliar with the basic substantive law in a particular area, he gently guided the student in the right direction without humiliation or embarrassment. On the other hand, if a student had a thorough grasp of the subject, Professor McCree led the analysis into greater degrees of intricacy. Whatever the level, all students, including the perpetual student McCree, left the room with a better understanding of the subject.

Professor McCree elected to teach a first-year ethics course and challenged his students to confront very difficult, yet real, issues that they would face in practice. He reminded us of the consequences of a lawyer's actions and the potential effect on the people involved. Whenever a student thought that there was an easy answer to a question, Professor McCree quietly interjected possible "complications" to the theory. Students left this course equipped with new skills, and better prepared to fulfill their duty to serve clients and society.

Professor McCree also had a wonderful sense of humor that he demonstrated often during class discussions. In one instance, after an extended discussion on original intent, a student threw up his hands in despair and said, "Don't you think the Founding Fathers would be amazed by what we are saying?" Professor McCree responded, "Don't you think the Founding Fathers would be amazed by a telephone?" His appreciation of smiling and laughter extended to the wall outside his office where a regular parade of comic strips, holding special meaning for law students (and professors), were posted for all who passed his doorway to enjoy.

II. AS A MENTOR

Professor McCree's door was always open. He was the only professor we have known whose office hours consisted of any time he was in — and that was almost always. He did not require that you actu-

ally enroll in one of his classes before he welcomed you into his office. All members of the law school community were his students, with whom he shared his thoughts and time.

Professor McCree was particularly happy to discuss, and encourage, a student's interest in judicial clerkships — a task for which he was eminently qualified. He eagerly shared his beliefs about what benefits an individual student could expect from clerking, as well as his knowledge of a particular judge or court. His only request was that the student provide some location preferences because, "It's a very large country, you know." He had a picture directory of federal judges that he would refer to when advising students. He would flip through the pages, making a kind remark about each person, and commenting on how the student might, or might not, benefit from working for a particular judge. Many students believed he personally knew *every* federal judge (or one of their relatives), as well as every judge in Michigan.

Professor McCree was always willing to back up his clerkship suggestions with a recommendation to the judge. It was easy to see how he personally knew so many people because he never wanted to write a recommendation but preferred instead to talk personally with the specific judge. We suspect that he relished the opportunity to renew past acquaintances, visit with longtime friends, as well as introduce himself to soon-to-be friends.

Professor McCree's advice and influence went far beyond clerkship recommendations. He enjoyed hearing of a student's career goals and helped several of us clarify our plans. He often introduced previously unconsidered options, particularly ones that would enable us to better serve people or society. If he had visited or worked in a particular location, you could count on his stories about the city to help you feel at home in a new place. As a rule, he would say, "I want you to call this person when you get to Washington. I'm sure she will be pleased to meet you." Just as often, he would share a recent letter he received from a former clerk, student, or colleague, informally "introducing" the student to a new contact. He provided an advantage available to few students — the chance to have an initial support network already in place prior to beginning a new job.

III. AS A ROLE MODEL

Professor McCree demonstrated that a successful lawyer can be gentle, kind, and caring. We hope to follow his fine example and add to the numbers of such considerate and compassionate lawyers.

Many of us will never know a finer lawyer than Professor McCree. Most students were surprised to learn of the extent of his accomplishments. He certainly knew that some problems required direct and vis-

ible action. Yet, just as often, he showed us that the most effective changes come about in more subtle ways.

When racial tensions escalated on the University of Michigan campus, Professor McCree was the only professor we know to address the issue in frank classroom discussions. He actively solicited our ideas about the cause and extent of the problem, as well as our thoughts on possible solutions. He listened carefully and quite likely passed the information on to those who were in positions to implement some of the suggestions. Perhaps the most appreciated element of this discussion was that he cared enough about the problem, and us, to encourage us to discuss the situation openly so as to consider our personal roles in implementing solutions.

Perhaps the most moving tribute to Professor McCree as a role model and mentor is expressed by one of his student friends.

I am one of many who have had the good fortune of developing a very warm and personal relationship with Judge McCree. This relationship gave me the very special opportunity of observing the extraordinary qualities of this man's mind and character. For this reason I am compelled to make more personal observations.

Approximately six weeks before beginning my first year of law school, I was leaving the reception area of Hutchins Hall when a gentleman cordially spoke as he briskly walked by en route to his mailbox. There was something strangely familiar about him. It seemed as if I had seen his face somewhere before, but where? Suddenly I realized he looked exactly like the man in a 1979 (or so) news photograph, who was standing on the steps of the United States Supreme Court, elegantly attired in a tuxedo with long coattails, carrying a briefcase, as he was on his way to argue before the Justices of the highest Court in the land, with the nation as his client! Accompanying the photograph was an article concerning "that" man's climb from a young Black inner city lawyer to his appointment as the second Black United States Solicitor General ever appointed in our nation's history.

As a Black American, I was especially moved by that article, and will never forget the tremendous spirit of pride and admiration it engendered throughout the Black community. Indeed, the man standing on the Court steps also stood as a radiant symbol of hope and a great source of inspiration for all Black generations to come. As he continued to collect his mail, I also recalled that the "man in the photo" was the same man who most believed would become the next Justice to sit on the United States Supreme Court had President Jimmy Carter won reelection.

Suddenly the reality that the "man in that photo" could be the same man gathering his mail, just twenty feet away, sent me reeling into a state of sheer exhilaration. After collecting my composure, I approached and inquired if he was "the" former United States Solicitor General Wade McCree. With a very warm and friendly smile he responded, "Yes, young man, I am," and almost in the same breath he inquired my name. "My name?," I thought. I immediately felt that the man was not merely inquiring my name out of politeness, but that he was sincerely

interested in knowing who I was. My subsequent observations of him at social and political gatherings proved my first impression correct. I am proud to join others with the knowledge that the Judge truly had a special love and affinity for people. He firmly subscribed to the belief that all people were important human beings with important things to offer and a capacity for goodness. This principle compelled him to treat all he encountered with sincere courtesy, and sensitivity, regardless of their status or station in life.

Following our exchange of greetings, he proceeded to invite me into his office to continue our little chat. That "little chat" lasted three exciting, memorable hours! As soon as I sat down, I knew I was in the presence of a very special being with exceptional human qualities. I was completely enthralled by his impeccable command of the English language, delightfully adorned by his charm in manner. He was brilliant. But what made his brilliance special was how it was seemingly clothed within a fabric of bounteous humility.

Illustrative of this fact was the Judge's penchant and love for extolling others. In virtually all of our discussions he was always sure to share his long and munificent memory of friends and colleagues. He thoroughly enjoyed proudly reciting not only the personal accomplishments of his friends and colleagues, but even the accomplishments of their family members! The Judge had literally hundreds of photographs of others and took special delight in exhibiting individuals as they became recipients of his praise. I remember observing in mesmerized admiration as he would get up and methodically charge through his voluminous files in resolute search of a particular photo, which, when found, invariably precipitated even more laudatory reflections.

I would also sit in utter amazement at the sheer number of people he would point to and say, "This person is one of the smartest people I have ever known." I would say to myself, "This proclamation is coming from a man who graduated twelfth in his class at Harvard Law School, a pre-eminent jurist of United States Supreme Court stature, a recipient of countless honorary degrees, who seems to have more letters behind his name than can be found in a can of alphabet soup." Indeed, he was exceedingly humble and generous in his praise of friends and colleagues.

Judge McCree knew and treasured the true meaning of friendship. He was a man who never forgot those who were instrumental in his illustrious career. He shared with me his appreciation for the compassion of the late, eminent attorney Harold Bledsoe, who gave McCree his first job as a lawyer when he arrived in Detroit. This was during the era when major law firms refused to hire Blacks and when it was virtually impossible for a young Black lawyer to make a living on his own. Often, the Judge spoke graciously of the pioneering courage of Governor G. Mennen Williams, who appointed him the first Black circuit court judge in Michigan. He was especially proud of his having won the support of the people in his bid for reelection. He also praised President Jimmy Carter for his unwavering commitment to the struggle for racial justice and equality as shown by his numerous appointments of Blacks and minorities to governmental posts, including McCree's own appointment as United States Solicitor General.

I must note that Judge McCree's generosity in praising others was not reserved solely for distinguished judges, prominent lawyers, high government officials, or longtime friends. No kindness or achievement of anyone he encountered went unrecognized. Whether it was the efficiency and patience of his secretary Kacey, the diligent work of his "Lawyers and Clients" partner Professor Chambers, or the thoughtfulness of Professor Proffit in dropping by his office with the inquiry, "Wade, do you need a ride home?," all received his praise and appreciation.

I cannot close without expressing my deeply felt gratitude for the Judge's interest in insuring that I graduate from law school with a thorough understanding of the special role a Black lawyer must assume in the community. For hours on end, the Judge would share with me his personal accounts of the civil rights movement and the early legal seeds planted by such brilliant NAACP attorneys as Huston, Hastie, and Marshall, during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

I'll never forget the day I asked him if he could recommend some books or materials that would help prepare me for my first year of classes. The Judge responded, "Yes, there are several books that I think will be of great assistance to you." He looked over the vast number of books neatly stacked on his shelves and said, "*Grace Under Pressure* is an excellent book; *Black Leader Black Voice* by James Weldon Johnson is another fine book; and also *Groundwork* by Genna Rae McNeil. If you can read one, that will be sufficient." Concealing my disappointment in not hearing one "How to" type law book or even a hornbook or treatise, I said, "Thanks, Judge!" Unenthusiastically I purchased the book *Grace Under Pressure* which was a book about a Black federal judge named William Hastie and the early court battles waged by NAACP lawyers. What a surprise! I enthusiastically inscribed on the final page, "Stirring, provocative, warm, tremendously insightful, absolutely necessary and greatly appreciated! Thanks, Judge!!"

It is now clear to me that Judge McCree was not interested in recommending a book that would be of assistance only during my three years of law school. His intent was to recommend a book that would have lifetime significance. His primary interest was that I leave law school not simply with the skills of lawyering, but with a strong commitment to the community, and the necessary motivation to utilize those skills in the ongoing fight for economic justice and racial equality. The clear message in the books he recommended was that, as a Black lawyer, you have an obligation and duty, regardless of your chosen area of practice, to contribute something of value to the betterment of your community.

On the day of his memorial, I'll always remember the consoling remarks expressed to me by my aunt, Mary Lou Parks, who also knew the Judge. She said, "Every so often, God creates a special being and places the person within the lives of others. Rejoice! And be grateful that you were one among the many 'touched' by the Judge, and never forget the ways he enriched and enlightened your life."

The last time I saw Judge McCree he was going down the stairs at his usual brisk pace. I exclaimed, "Slow down, Judge!" He extended his

usual warm and endearing smile but, of course — you guessed it. The Judge didn't break his vigorous pace.

CONCLUSION

We miss Professor McCree. It is difficult to walk by his office and not expect to hear him call out an invitation to come in and visit. He was a selfless teacher, mentor, and role model. The law school is not the same without him. But his presence remains with us, his students, and we know that we will be better lawyers because of the special role he played in each of our lives.

— *Professor McCree's Students*