Judge John Williams opens up about living, dying and dealing with loss

Renaissance by Ashley Owby

Renaissance men are becoming a rare breed in America, even rarer among barristers in the legal profession. That would make John Everett Williams, a Court of Criminal Appeals judge in Tennessee, one of the rarest jewels in the halls of American justice.

Williams is described as a modern day West Tennessee version of a renaissance man, being a sitting Judge on the Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals for over 16 years, a thespian, a longtime member of the International Brotherhood of Magicians and the chairman of the Tennessee Lawyers Assistance Program.

Judge Williams recently spoke at the regular monthly Bradley County Bar Association meeting regarding TLAB and he shared a story about living, dying, and how we should treat those around us who have emotional and substance abuse issues.

The following account was reported by a Cleveland attorney at law, Ashley Owby:

Williams said in his classic Southern drawl, "Huntingdon, Tennessee, is my home. With a population of 4,500 people, it looks just like downtown Cleveland with no red, green or yellow lights. When I got out of school, I set up a solo practice and with the help of many people, I began practicing law." Williams went on to speak of a friend and mentor who had a law office directly across the street who referred him clients regularly. "The referrals were nothing big, but I needed the work then and I appreciated it. He referred me business for years."  

Shortly after Williams was nominated to sit as a judge on the Tennessee Criminal Court of Appeals, his mentor came to him and said that he was leaving his law practice. His friend, a lifelong alcoholic, was unable to work anymore and was retiring and closing his office. After his friend closed his practice, Williams began using him to help research legal questions involved in the appellate cases he was deciding. His friend was smart and loved that type of work. Also at that time, Williams' law clerk was going into another area of the law and told the judge he would be leaving his clerk position. I informed my friend of this opening, and asked if he would come to work for me full time. His friend responded, "I don't know if I can do this, are you sure you know what you are doing?" After some coaxing, his friend finally agreed and they worked together for five years within 15 feet of each other. They saw each other every day, reviewing transcripts and researching law, and actively involved with helping the judge do what was necessary to write opinions deciding appellate cases. For those five years, everything was going well for Williams and his friend. Then, one day around 9:30 a.m., his friend appeared to be under the influence.

He had obviously been drinking since early that morning, and was too drunk to be in the office. Williams' heart was broken. "I had never felt so betrayed before in my life. I had put my reputation on the line, I had worked with him for five years, and he meant more to me than any attorney I had ever met in my life and there he was, drunk in my office at 9:30 in the morning. What was I supposed to do?" he recounted.

Williams became very angry. He was not going to let his mentor disrespect him, disrespect the office, and damage his life or health in front of Williams anymore. He felt they were at a crossroad. "I told him to get out of my office and that I never wanted to see him again. He left. In such a short amount of time, a longtime friendship was destroyed and I never spoke to him again."  

Williams admitted he did not know what was the correct thing to do in this situation but he did what he thought was best at the time. Then, one evening several months later, Williams received a call from his secretary who said that she was at his friend's...
"I carry the guilt about his death with me until this day. I often wish that I had done something different," Williams confessed.

Williams told the group of local attorneys he had to seek counseling to help him understand his friend's passing and what he said to him. Why was he unable to look across the table and see someone suffering and have no empathy for them? After some time, he came to realize even though he wished he had done some things different, his mentor's passing was not his fault. It was the alcoholism and depression.

"My friend was not destitute. He could have donated his entire salary because he did not need the money. It was about pride, ownership and being somebody," he said.

A short time later while he was dealing with his friend's passing, a well-liked staff attorney with the judge's office was reported missing by his husband, who was driving around the town in a panic looking for her. Williams contacted the sheriff and after a short period of time the body of the 42-year-old attorney, mother, and wife was found in a parking area in Kentucky. The security cameras in the area confirmed she had died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound that took place in a parking lot next to her car. Having two deaths from self-inflicted wounds took a toll on Williams and his office staff.

"Everyone in my office was involved, with counseling for some time," he said. "These tragedies affected everyone and everyone deals with grief differently, but we all must come to terms with it."

Judge Williams told the Bar he was very familiar with the passing of local City Court Judge Bill Moss. He stated he knew that attorneys in the area saw him every day and probably questioned why this happened. He challenged the Bar to try to make sure these types of acts do not occur again.

In his position as the first chairman of TLAP, he related to the Bar several stories of attorneys across the state with emotional issues, addictions, and other difficulties that can cause serious depression. He further urged the local Bar to be aware of depression signs in peers and family and try and make sure that everyone gets the help they need. He further urged members of the Bar to volunteer to aid other attorneys and mentor younger attorneys throughout the state.

"Attorneys are the hardest-working people, and it is important to work hard in the practice of law, but it is also important to work hard keeping your family, and your priorities, in order," he said.

"Sometimes we cannot understand why some people do what they do, but we must understand it is not our fault, and we must deal with the losses of people who come into our lives, and we should always be aware of someone in distress," he said in closing.