
ATTORNEY PROFILE

Erma Greenwood

By: Jerome Melson

The green leather chair sits behind the walnut desk as it has for over forty years, as warm, comfortable, and reliable as the woman who occupies it. Erma Greenwood, the latest recipient of the Knoxville Bar Association's Governor's Award, is justifiably proud of her legal career which has spanned over five decades.

Greenwood, a native of Honaker, Virginia, hails from a family of lawyers. Her grandfather and father practiced law in Virginia just as Erma did at the outset of her career and just as her brother continues to do. Erma Greenwood is no stranger to the bar.

Greenwood's early exposure to the challenges and rewards offered by the practice of law led her to choose it as her own career. She received her undergraduate and legal education at Duke University. She graduated from law school the only female in the Class of 1939. Her Duke classmates there included Richard Nixon, known to Erma simply as "Dick".

"He was a friend ... the kind of person everybody went to when they needed help," she recalls.

Despite being 1 of only 3 females in the total law school enrollment of 100 students, Greenwood has fond memories of her legal education.

"People think this is strange, but I believe that as the only woman in my class, I had some advantages over the other students. For one thing, if I happened to do a good job in my studies, a professor would notice me quicker than the men in the class.

Also, for me law school was hard work but it was rewarding because it was like I had an entire class of big brothers," she concluded.

Passing the Virginia bar exam in 1938, Greenwood completed her degree the following year and returned home where she practiced law with her father for four years before coming to Knoxville in 1943. She assumed a position with the predecessor of what is today the firm of Kramer, Rayson, McVeigh, Leake and Rogers. Her career has been dominated by litigation in a wide variety of areas including worker's compensation, products liability, automobile accident cases, bond cases and condemnation disputes.

"I guess you could say I've been an expert in a lot of areas at different times. Sometimes I think specialization like that is good and sometimes I'm not so sure," says Erma.

When not attending to the daily demands of her practice, Erma enjoys reading mystery and suspense fiction by such authors as Tom Clancy, Agatha Christie and Helen McGillis. She also participates in a number of community service organizations such as the Knoxville Volunteer Rescue Squad, the United Way, the Girl Scouts, the Girl's Club and Travelers Aid. She is also a past President of the East Tennessee Community Improvement Program. In addition she has been a member of Church Street United Methodist Church since 1943.

Erma Greenwood has accomplished much in her career. Aside from her prolific litigation experience, she has been approached several times over the years by those desiring her ascension to the bench. During the Nixon administration, she was discussed as a possible United States Supreme Court nominee for the seat eventually claimed by Lewis Powell. In 1976, she made a strong showing as a candidate for the Tennessee Supreme Court. Widely respected by her colleagues and clients alike, she is the first woman to receive the Knoxville Bar Association's highest honor, the Governor's Award, recognizing her contribution to the profession.

"I'm not really sure why they chose me, but I am deeply grateful for the honor," Erma modestly comments.

She pauses and lifts a Pall Mall from the package in her purse. "I guess," she continues, "someone may have realized that I've always tried to practice law with a sense of honor and responsibility." She leans back in her green leather chair to consider her thought.

Ms. Greenwood, we know you are right.