

ROBERT A. WEEMS

Newt P. Harrison

Every generation or so a teacher emerges at the Ole Miss law school who is a legend in his own time. Professor John Fox and Dean Robert J. Farley come to mind. Today, I have the honor to salute Bob Weems, another law professor who has attained that status.

I first met Bob in the fall of 1955 when he entered Millsaps College as a freshman. At the time I was beginning my junior year. We ended up in the same fraternity and soon became close friends. It was obvious from the get-go Bob was leader of people. He was well liked, had a keen sense of humor, and was an outstanding student with a really good grade point average, a rarity, I might add, among the guys in our fraternity. His sophomore year, he was elected treasurer of our fraternity. As I recall, he held that position for at least two years. He was an excellent choice for several reasons. Even as a sophomore, Bob had an abundance of common sense. He also knew how to balance a check book. He demanded we exercise fiscal responsibility and, most importantly, he enjoyed the respect of every member of the chapter. We had a large number of members whose philosophy was: never allow a lack of money get in the way of a good party. However, because of the respect Bob commanded among all of the members, he was almost always able to stop the party committee in its tracks when we were "broke," which was most of the time. Probably due to winning most of his confrontations with the party wing of the chapter we were still solvent when Bob graduated.

Upon graduation, Bob could have undoubtedly qualified for Officer Candidate School in any branch of the military and gone into the Armed Services as an officer. Bob opted, however, to join the Army as an enlisted man. He would later remark to his brother, Tommy, the best way to envision the difference between an enlisted man and an officer was to look at the institution of segregation in the Deep South in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Though he went into the Army as "low man on the totem pole," he was, not

surprisingly, assigned to military intelligence and was involved in top secret operations in Turkey for much of his tenure in the service. Even after his return from the service, he would never really talk about his job, saying simply what he did was classified.

After his discharge from the service Bob returned to Jackson and took a job as a ninth grade math teacher at Chastain Junior High School. I had recently purchased a house in Northeast Jackson, about one half mile from Chastain and was living there with Don Morrison, an up and coming young lawyer in town, and one other friend. We had an extra bed and invited Bob to move in with us, which he did. Bob's ability to adapt to any situation and to improvise when necessary soon became apparent. Shortly after Bob moved in, the stove quit working (probably because it was clogged with grease). Thus, if we wanted anything hot to eat in the evening, we had to go to the nearest restaurant. Not Bob. A few days after the stove died, I found Bob at the breakfast table eating a bowl of steaming hot soup. I asked if the stove had been repaired. He replied it had not. He had simply heated the soup in the coffee pot.

After teaching at Chastain for several years, Bob made a decision that would have a profound effect on the law profession in Mississippi. He decided to go to law school and enrolled at Ole Miss in the fall of 1964. As might be expected, he was one of the leading students at the University. Upon graduation in August of 1967, Bob joined the Brunini firm in Vicksburg. In due course, he became a partner in the firm and continued to practice in Vicksburg for almost twelve years. Bob rapidly established himself as a valued member of the firm and as one of the outstanding young attorneys in Warren county.

Chris Shapley, recognized today as one of the leading trial attorneys in Mississippi, tells the following story. It was in the mid 1970s, and Chris had recently joined the Jackson office of the Brunini law firm. As luck would have it, his first case was in the Warren County Chancery Court in Vicksburg. He associated Bob to assist him in the trial. Things did not go well from the very beginning, primarily because the opposing attorney always had an excuse why the case needed to be continued. This went on for over a year. Finally, Bob and Chris were able to get the case set. The day before the trial the opposing attorney again tried to delay the case. The Chancellor agreed to a hearing on the attempted delay. The

hearing became quite heated with Chris suggesting, in rather blunt terms, that the opposing attorney was not being entirely truthful, whereupon the opposing attorney offered to be put under oath. Chris responded it would not do any good. With that, Chris and the opposing attorney charged each other. They would have ended up in a fist fight in the judge's chambers had it not been for Bob. He immediately stepped between the two adversaries and, with the judge's help, restored order. Bob's advice to Chris, after the conference was over, was, "Clients pay us to represent them, not to fight for them."

The Apostle Paul tells us, in *First Corinthians*, we are all given special gifts, and God expects us to use those gifts for the betterment of mankind. As successful as he was in the active practice, Bob recognized he had a special gift for teaching. So, in 1977, after a very successful twelve years as a practicing attorney, he resigned his position as a partner in the Brunini law firm and returned to Oxford as a member of the Ole Miss law faculty. To say Bob has had a successful career as a law professor would be a gross understatement. It has been absolutely magnificent. His influence on the law profession in this state and on the students he taught will continue for generations.

Others who are currently associated with Bob at Ole Miss are much more knowledgeable than me concerning his impact on the University. They undoubtedly will, as they should, write about the number of times he was selected as the law professor of the year by the student body and about the significant contributions he has made to the law school and to the University over the years. Those accomplishments and contributions *are* truly significant and the attorneys of this state should be made aware of them. I would like to focus, however, on Bob's influence on his former students and how they describe his impact on their lives and careers.

Over the past several days, I have interviewed many of Bob's former students. Some of those students were in his first class. Some have just recently graduated. All of the interviews were one-on-one and none of the people interviewed had any idea what others had said. Most live and work in the Jackson metropolitan area, though some are from other parts of Mississippi. Yet, all of them told the same story and, much to my amazement, in many cases answered my questions with virtually the same words. As

might be expected, they were, to a person, unanimous, on one important point—if Bob is not the best professor they ever had, he certainly is in the top two or three.

David Kaufman, one of Mississippi's leading trial attorneys, was a senior in law school in 1977. When he heard Bob was going to teach trial practice he decided to take the course because he knew Bob, as a former practicing attorney, would have a great deal of practical advice about the practice of law. According to David, "I was absolutely astounded . . ." by Bob's ability to not only explain, in clear and understandable terms what the law is, but how to apply it in the actual trial of a lawsuit. As David put it, "Bob made the course fun." As a matter of fact, and this is an exact quote from David:

He was one of the reasons I was interested in being a trial lawyer. He made it interesting and he took a lot of the fear out of it. He taught you in a way that made you think about what you were doing and what you were trying to accomplish. My only regret is that I was a senior when Bob arrived, and I didn't have a chance to take more than one of his classes.

While David was a senior Bob's first year, Gee Ogletree, now one of the senior partners at Adams & Reese in Ridgeland, Mississippi, was a first year law student. As he put it, "Bob and I started together. Being a new law student and having no idea what to expect, I was terrified, and, to tell the truth, Bob seemed to be a little nervous the first few weeks. But, by the end of the semester, he one of our favorite teachers." Gee's description of Bob as a teacher and a person included words like "fair," "practical," "enthusiastic," "caring," "genuinely concerned about his students," "always tried to put us at ease," and "determined to help us learn." I heard these same words over and over as I interviewed former students.

Perhaps the ultimate compliment came from Katie Wallace, who graduated in 2005. Katie took every class Bob taught because ". . . he was such a wonderful teacher and made you want to learn. . . . I never went to his class unprepared." I had already heard virtually the same statements from a number of Bob's other former students. When I asked Katie how Bob motivated his students, she paused for a moment and then said—and again this

is an exact quote—“He was kind of like a parent figure. No one wanted to disappoint Mr. Weems. I would never want him to think I was not prepared because I thought so much of him as a person. . . . Everyone came prepared because we all had so much respect for him.”

Katie Gilchrist is one of the leading health care attorneys in the state. She is also an adjunct professor at the Ole Miss law school, teaching a class once a week in health care law. Though she took only took one class from Bob in 1991, she still remembers “what a great professor” he was and, for that reason, “I try to follow his example and teaching methods in my classes at Ole Miss.”

Bob’s influence goes beyond his former students. Lynne Green, one of the leading attorneys in Mississippi in wills and estates never had the opportunity to take any of Bob’s classes. Nonetheless, he had, and continues to have, a profound influence on her practice. As Lynne put it:

I have called him many times with questions, because he is such a guru to everybody in my practice area. We all have his books and we refer to them regularly. You see him cited in court cases all the time. So that is where everybody goes for information. And he has been very generous with people who are practicing. He is always willing to provide advice and counsel. . . . Anytime we can cite from Bob’s books in court, we do it because it carries so much weight.

I never had the opportunity to take a class under Bob Weems. I well remember, however, when he and Professor Guff Abbot first kicked off their annual seminar on Mississippi law. I decided I should go because Bob and I were close friends. To be honest, I was not overly enthusiastic about the idea, but, since the seminar was in Jackson and because I need the CLE credits, I went. I never missed another one of their seminars while I was in the active practice of law, even when I did not need the CLE credits. In fact, for several years after I retired, I still attended their seminar, not because I had to, but because I wanted to.

In the *Gospel of Matthew*, Jesus told his disciples the Parable of the Talents. It is a familiar story. The master of the house was going on a long journey. He gave several talents to one of the servants. The servant used the talents to produce much good.

When the master returned and saw what the servant had done he commended him, saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" As his teaching career comes to a close, I am certain beyond a shadow of a doubt, Bob will also hear, if he listens closely, the Master's voice saying to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"