

JUDGE JOLLY

*Alysson Mills**

A youthful 80, Judge E. Grady Jolly has many years yet to charm.

I first met Judge Jolly when I was a summer intern for U.S. Senator Thad Cochran in Washington, D.C. A friend from Mississippi invited me to a grown-up party, and I had nothing better to do. The party was outside of town and so necessitated a car. My friend had an old Honda that was in a severe state of disrepair, but it would get us there.

On our way we stopped to pick up another guest, a fellow Mississippian. The Honda approached an elegant hotel—surely no one staying there was going any place we were going, not in this car! From the hotel walked a lean man, elegant himself, with white hair and tortoise shell glasses, wearing a perfectly tailored summer suit and white bucks. He got in the car and off we puttered, all of us a little puzzled.

At nineteen, you don't know what the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit is. I didn't know who Judge Jolly was—I only sensed that he was probably important.

But not self-important. Anyone who knows Judge Jolly knows how disarming he is. He can tease anybody, in the distinct way that he teases everybody.

After what seemed like a very long drive, we arrived at our destination—a fancy affair—and our car lined up behind a string of sleek black cars depositing other guests at the hosts' receiving line. Our turn at the front came, and our car lurched forward. A noisy stop, then a moment of panic when the car's back seat door

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handle proved broken. Tickled at the spectacle, Judge Jolly manually rolled his window down, dramatically reached his arm out, and opened the door from the outside. From the crumpled car rolled out the tall judge—wrinkleless, as always.

No doubt Judge Jolly has forgotten it, but that small good-humored gesture left an impression on me. “T-damn-rific ride,” he said with a big smile.

I met Judge Jolly again many years later when I interviewed to be his law clerk. I was fortunate to get the job and, of course, the experience was a formative one. One takeaway that sticks with me is a writing pointer that is also excellent lawyering advice: When making your point, Judge Jolly once said, “put it on the ground so the little goats can eat it.” In other words, keep it simple. Don’t try to sound important.

All of Judge Jolly’s law clerks, most far smarter than I, can attest to his acumen and his impact on the law. Certainly over the course of a 35-years-and-counting career he has authored opinions that merit special note.

I would like to note simply that his opinions shine because they don’t try to sound important, even when they are. Whereas another judge might impress us with his or her cleverness, Judge Jolly lets the law explain an outcome. His unaffectedness as a judge results in opinions that are neither cute nor heavy—like his suits, they are stylistically just right.