

MY DEAR AND DELIGHTFUL FRIEND DEBBIE

*Tresa B. Patterson**

Several years ago, I was speaking with a very fine attorney who practiced law with one of the finest law firms in the southeast. He recalled a “bitterly contentious” case in state circuit court in the Mississippi Delta in 1982.

According to this grey-haired litigator, a regional bank had refused to honor large checks written by certain cotton merchants. The bank’s refusal resulted in a years-long imbroglio between the bank, the cotton merchants, the cotton factors, and the farmers. As I listened to this lawyer tell a story from 40 years ago, it sounded as though “bitterly contentious” didn’t begin to cover it.

The merchants were represented by a well-respected Delta firm of eight to ten lawyers. The bank was represented by the larger southeastern firm. Recalling the case, the lawyer said that on the verge of trial, “when the merchants didn’t appear to have a leg to stand on” and were sure to lose every claim on summary judgment, the Delta firm hired Debbie Bell.

It was Dean Bell, then a newly hired Ole Miss law professor, and not the eight to ten lawyers representing the cotton merchants, who found the “small print” in the Uniform Commercial Code to allow the cotton merchants to argue, at the eleventh hour, that the bank had dishonored the cotton merchants’ checks two hours too late. Now, instead of losing on every point, the bank would have to honor the substantial checks. According to my court-grizzled storyteller, the Delta lawyers gave Dean Bell every bit of credit for saving their case.

This story will be no surprise to anyone who has worked with Dean Bell. She is the finest legal mind in Mississippi. Her ability to crystallize an issue is only matched by her simultaneous ability to

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think comprehensively and that, my dear reader, is only matched by her humility. Dean Bell would never tell you she is smart. However, it is as evident as her beauty in a matter of minutes. And her humility is likely why, 40 years ago, the cotton merchants' counsel was so comfortable giving her all the credit: Dean Bell's actions speak for her, and in so doing, she inspires all of us to sing her praises.

Dean Bell has served Mississippi in so many ways. I am most grateful for her mastery of Mississippi family law and her dedication to sharing her knowledge with students and practitioners. Bell on Mississippi Family Law is my professional Bible, as it is for so many who practice in chancery court. I can't tell you how many times I have watched a chancellor reach for Bell on Mississippi Family Law from the bookshelf, the briefcase, or the desk. The chancellor will search Dean Bell's pages, and a puzzle in equity will be solved. There's no telling how many times a day Dean Bell's work guides family law decisions in our state and our nation. What a testament to her service, humility, and brilliance.

Congratulations to my dear and delightful friend Debbie on her induction into the Ole Miss Law School Hall of Fame, in her first year of eligibility. You inspire all of us to sing your praises, and work to match your example.