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Bigger Than Life

It is a genuine privilege to be able to write an article for a journal like the Orange County Lawyer about my father Judge William P. Gray: distinguished jurist, attorney, civic leader, mentor, teacher, friend, golf partner, pianist, grandfather of five, father of two, and husband of one for more than 50 years – Bill Gray was many things to many people, and in many ways, he was bigger than life itself.



The first time I heard my father described this way was from a quote attributed to Judge Gary Taylor, who called him a “Bigger than life kind of guy.”

Since the time that he was taken from us on February 10 of this year I have tried to put into words why my father seemed to be “bigger than life” to me and to others. After some time, I channeled my thoughts into four categories, which are that: 1) he had and displayed a genuine love of people; 2) he had an inspirational work ethic; 3) he had a private life; and, 4) that he led by example rather than by preaching.

William P. Gray knew and incorporated into his life that “Nobody wants to be a nobody.” Everyone was treated as a somebody by Bill Gray, both on and off the bench. This care and treatment of people emanated from a genuine love and affection that he had for people. Speaking from my own lifelong experience, I can say honestly that he really cared for me not only as a son, but also as a person. Even when I was only four or five years old, I felt that my opinions actually counted with my father. In looking back, he made me feel that way more because even then he treated me as a real person who had feelings and who had value. Years later Dad conveyed this same feeling of worth to federal prisoners who appeared before him. Even though some of these prisoners received a maximum prison sentence, they still wrote letters to him saying that they had been fairly treated and that he was the best judge that they had ever appeared before (and for some that included quite a few judges) because he listened to them and treated them with dignity.



In a similar fashion, I have had many attorneys tell me that he swore them in to practice before the federal court and took the opportunity to make the occasion both personal and

meaningful. In short, he cared for them and treated them as individuals. There were numerous other times when I was in the federal courthouse with my father, and he would introduce me to members of the custodial staff by name, and inquire by name about their children. It was easy to see that his interest was genuine, that this made the staff members feel good, and that they loved him for it.

Bill Gray came from a modest background to attain a position of and be recognized as one of the true leaders of the legal community. He put himself through UCLA and also through Harvard Law School, where he graduated cum laude. After he was discharged as a Lieutenant Colonel from the Army at the end of World War II, he formed his own law firm on Spring Street in Los Angeles. Gray, Brinkley and Pfaelzer eventually merged with another firm after Dad was appointed to the bench to become Kadison, Pfaelzer, Woodard, Quinn and Rossi. Dad served as president of the Los Angeles County Bar Association in 1956, and president of the State Bar of California in 1963. He was one of the few Republicans to be appointed to the U.S. District Court by President Johnson, where he served for 25 years until 1991. He received the Shattuck-Price Award from the Los Angeles County Bar Association in 1979 (which is the Los Angeles equivalent of the Franklin G. West Award), and the same Association's Outstanding Trial Jurist Award in 1984.



My father was a very intelligent person, but there are lots of intelligent people in this world. The secret was, Bill Gray worked hard, and he got the most out of his abilities.

When he played as a 150-pound center in the Class "C" freshman football team at UCLA, Dad got his nose bloodied with some frequency, but always kept on going back to help the team. The motto which he

gave to us when he was our pack's Cub Scout Master was "Do Your Best." Bill Gray lived his entire life by that motto; quite simply on any occasion, Bill Gray did his best.

My father had a very real and distinct private life. Probably that would surprise many people who just knew him at work. He had an original and refreshing sense of humor, and my mother, sister and I could recount numerous examples of his humor if given half a chance. As a further private side, he would play with a child openly and without being self-conscious. In addition, even in formal and highly public gatherings, Dad would use particular family signals to say to one or more of us in the audience that "I love you." This private side says to me that his values and priorities in life were set straight, and, for me, made my father bigger than life.

Finally, although I never really focused upon this until he was gone, Dad never preached. Instead he led the life that others only try to live, and led us by his example. During the McCarthy era, Dad appeared before a branch of the House of Un-American Activities Commission and represented attorneys who had themselves represented unpopular

clients. As a judge, he found himself in lengthy cases between prisoners and the ACLU on the one hand, and the sheriffs on Orange and Los Angeles Counties on the other with regard to the large and complex issues of jail overcrowding. While upholding the basic rights of people who are in the care of our jail systems, he still won the respect and admiration of these diverse parties with their diverse interests.

When a malignant brain tumor made it clear in about March or April of 1991 that he could no longer be able to continue effectively in his official duties, Judge William P. Gray stepped down from the bench. There was a hidden blessing in this because it gave a fairly large number of people and institutions, such as the Orange County Bar Foundation and the Orange County Chapter of the Federal Bar Association, the opportunity, in effect, to eulogize my father while he was still with us to hear it. However, true so form, Dad quietly continued to use his remaining time and efforts to lead and inspire by involving himself in a counseling program at my sister's and my former high school in Pasadena, where he became very well known and loved on campus. As a result of his efforts, literally hundreds of high school minority students see our justice system and our system of government in general in a much more personal and beneficial sense. In addition, his efforts have resulted in the creation of a computer training center at the high school which should continue to contribute positively to many of our young people for many years to come.

William P. Gray did not take very much from our society: but he quietly gave a lot back. He was a man of gentle firmness and was devoted to making a world a better place for everyone. After he lost his own father, he commented to me that his father had led a long and full life, and that he had no right to complain that his own father was gone. But, Dad said, "You just miss him."



Well, Dad was right. At various times in my life I have sung in various concerts and talent shows, and almost always Dad was behind the scenes accompanying me on the piano. In a similar fashion, Dad has accompanied me on so many things throughout my life. I have been so blessed to be his son, and none of us has any right to complain that he has been taken from us. But he was bigger than life, and I am going to miss him.

- Judge Jim Gray

**THE BENCH AND BAR REMEMBER
WILLIAM P. GRAY
By Susan Lee Waggener**

Judge William P. Gray was appointed to the United States District Court (Central District) in 1966. In 1990, he underwent surgery to remove a brain tumor. Another brain tumor was discovered in 1991, but he continued on the bench despite difficulties caused

by the new tumor. When the tumor made it increasingly difficult for him to express himself, Judge Gray announced his retirement, effective May of 1991. He passed away February 10, 1992, at the age of 79.

Trial lawyers may remember Judge Gray because of notoriety gained in the case involving jail overcrowding in Orange County. When he found that prisoners were sleeping in crowded cells and were jammed on floors, in showers and next to toilet, Judge Gray ordered in 1978 that county officials take numerous steps to improve jail conditions. He was conscientious and assertive in enforcing his orders, by periodically touring the jails and finding county officials in contempt.

The accolades of Judge William P. Gray are overwhelming:

“They say that no man is irreplaceable, but Bill Gray is not replaceable.” (U.S. District Judge Lawrence Lydick).

“He was probably the most distinguished occupant of a seat on this bench.” (U.S. District Judge Robert Kelleher).

“We really lost a man of justice.” (U.S. District Judge David W. Williams).

“An extraordinary man in his career as a lawyer and as a leader of the bar and as a judge.” (U.S. District Judge William M. Byrne, Jr.).

“Bill Gray was the fairest, the most gentlemanly judge I’ve ever met. He inspired other judges and lawyers and people in the legal community to be kinder toward each other. He was an inspiration for lots of lawyers.” (Newport Beach attorney Richard P. Herman).

“He was always a gentleman and extremely professional with us.” (Sheriff Brad Gates).

“His motto, which carried back to his days as a Cub Scout leader, was ‘Do your best,’ ... and he really lived by it.” (Gray’s son, OC Superior Court Judge James P. Gray).

I am not a trial lawyer, and therefore never met Judge Gray in court or through litigation-related activities. I had the opportunity to know him through the Ninth Judicial Circuit Historical Society Oral History Program. I interviewed him in October, 1991. He knew he was dying, but he didn’t know whether his life would be taken in a year, in a month or the next day. I learned a lot that day-after the interview was concluded. I learned about his strength, character and integrity when he voluntarily shared with me his thoughts on his impending death.

What did he do when he discovered that he was dying? He did not indulge in sorrowful self-pity. Instead, he conscientiously wrapped up his unfinished cases and aggressively sought to fulfill the primary dream that he had always hoped to accomplish. Judge Gray had planned to spend what he believed would be many years of retirement from the

bench working on behalf of teenagers at John Muir High School, a “rough-and-tumble” public high school in Pasadena, previously attended by both of his children. The Judge felt strongly that the school needed a learning center equipped with the IBM compatible computers commonly used in the workplace. He wanted all future graduates to leave with keyboarding, word processing and computer literacy skills.

When word spread that Judge Gray would not be with us much longer, his good friend attorney Richard Riordan (through the Riordan Foundation), along with other friends of the Judge, fulfilled the Judge’s dream of a computer lab. The William P. Gray Learning Center presently has over 30 computers (with a value exceeding \$100,000) that enable students to learn data processing and to use the computers for academic classwork. Several of his former law clerks formed a permanent scholarship at the school in his name. Judge Gray then told Principal Alvin Fortune he would like to volunteer his services to work with the high school students. He unselfishly poured his efforts into guiding the students on an individual basis. His impact was quite varied. He visited classes and shared his expertise with the students. He attended pep rallies. He became friends with youngsters on a very personal level. He counseled students in the job placement program. He played the piano in the choir room. The student where surprised to find that the Judge showed none of the self-importance they expected from a man of his stature. He loaned his gavel and robe to a student-actor playing a judge in a school play. He arranged for Judge Wapner, of People’s Court fame, to speak to the students.

Judge Gray particularly hoped to influence students in their future careers. He found job openings in major Los Angeles law firms for two students. However, out of six people interviewed, the Judge didn’t have the heart to reject any of the applicants. Consequently, he found four more jobs with four more law firms. Judge Gray personally accompanied each student through the hiring interviews, and afterwards frequently checked up with them to ensure that they were enjoying their work. One of the students warmly stated, “Everyone who has gotten to know him has realized what a warm, generous and caring man he is. I’ll never forget how much he helped me, and I will always be inspired by his example.”

Judge Gray revealed to me his hope that the students of John Muir High School would be benefited long after his death. He proudly told me that in lieu of flowers at his funeral, he requested donations to the school. The Judge would be proud to learn that the donations have been quite substantial to date.

Judge Gray’s presence has been felt and enjoyed by all who have known him, particularly those students at John Muir High School. He has left a valuable legacy to his family, friends, colleagues and his community. Judge Gray – well will miss you.

Note: The Ninth Judicial Circuit Historical Society is a membership organization which researches and records Western legal history. The society publishes a journal entitled “Western Legal History.” The Ninth Judicial Circuit Historical Society Oral History Program is a program to obtain histories (by way of interviews) of members of the bench and bar, in order to provide research resource for future historians of Western law. If you

would like to volunteer to participate in the program, please contact Chet Orloff,
Director, Ninth Judicial Circuit Historical Society, 125 South Grand Avenue, Pasadena
CA 91105; (818) 405-7059.

Granddaddy and Betta, I miss you. You live and breathe through all of your family. I
miss you both - dearly. Love, Ky