

2021

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Clyde McGee

Parker Kline

Kristi Johnson

Charles Blanchard

Krissy Nobile

See next page for additional authors

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Recommended Citation

McGee, Clyde; Kline, Parker; Johnson, Kristi; Blanchard, Charles; Nobile, Krissy; Adams, Blake; Mauldin, Drew; Lollar, Blythe; Bragg, Grafton; McHugh, Daniel; Mitchell, Amy; Young, Ray; Beatty, Katie; Slusher, Allison; Oaty, Stephen; and de Sola, Lawrence (2021) "Fundamental Lessons Learned Working with Sharion Aycock," *Mississippi College Law Review*. Vol. 39 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://dc.law.mc.edu/lawreview/vol39/iss3/6>

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Fundamental Lessons Learned Working with Sharion Aycock

Authors

Clyde McGee, Parker Kline, Kristi Johnson, Charles Blanchard, Krissy Nobile, Blake Adams, Drew Mauldin, Blythe Lollar, Grafton Bragg, Daniel McHugh, Amy Mitchell, Ray Young, Katie Beatty, Allison Slusher, Stephen Oaty, and Lawrence de Sola

FUNDAMENTAL LESSONS LEARNED WORKING WITH SHARION AYCOCK

*Former Chief Judge Aycock Clerks**

I. INTRODUCTION

By any standard, Sharion Aycock's career has been a success. After graduating from Mississippi College School of Law second in her class where she served as Co-Editor-in-Chief of the Law Review, she practiced law in her hometown for twenty-three years. She was then elected and served as a Circuit Court Judge for the First Circuit Court District of Mississippi from 2003 until she was appointed to the federal bench by President George W. Bush in 2007. She was unanimously confirmed by the Senate, a feat almost unheard of these days. But if you were to ask Judge Aycock today about her career, she would undoubtedly give credit to others with whom she has worked along the way. From the female attorney in Fulton, Mississippi who gave her her first job out of law school, to the colleague who pushed her to run for state court judge, to the court administrators and courtroom deputies who have kept her schedule along with the thousands of other details of her life in order. Judge Aycock does not look for recognition but instead takes pride in the impact she has had on others.

Since her confirmation to the federal bench in 2007, Judge Aycock has employed sixteen law clerks. Most of them clerked for two-year terms, except for her three career law clerks. Regardless of the time spent in Judge Aycock's Chambers, our experiences are all similar – an unbreakable bond between mentor and mentee and a look into the very definition of what it means to be a leader in the law.

II. A FEW FUNDAMENTAL LESSONS WE ALL LEARNED WORKING WITH SHARION AYCOCK

As a law clerk for Judge Aycock, you learn a lot—but these lessons are not limited to learning about the law or how judges make decisions. You learn life lessons through your interactions with Judge Aycock and by

* The following former law clerks to Chief Judge Sharion Aycock authored this article: Clyde McGee, Parker Kline, Kristi Johnson, Charles Blanchard, Krissy Nobile, Blake Adams, Drew Mauldin, Blythe Lollar, Grafton Bragg, Daniel McHugh, Amy Mitchell, Ray Young, Katie Beatty, Allison Slusher, Stephen Otey, and Lawrence de Sola.

observing how she carries herself and interacts with others on a daily basis. Below is an explanation of just a few of those lessons.

A. Be as kind to the custodian as you are to the CEO

One of the advantages of being an Aycock clerk is her willingness to take you with her everywhere. Sharion Aycock gives a lot of speeches. She talks to the Rotary Clubs, Pilot Clubs, the Historical Societies, the Garden Clubs, and county bar associations. She also has given a commencement speech at Mississippi State University, numerous remarks at Naturalization Ceremonies, and other judges' investitures. Judge Aycock has always been willing to bring her law clerks with her to these "COE" (Continuing Other Education) events – not in a boastful way – but as an opportunity for her clerks to see public service in action and as networking opportunities. Of course, there are always some bags to carry or chairs to move around too.

Depending on the topic of her speech, one of the main themes Judge Aycock preaches is kindness to all. To her, this is not just a feel-good saying but a way of life. Judge Aycock would often ask the Court Security Officers how they perceived a law clerk candidate when they came for interviews. She respected their opinion as much as anyone else's. She opens her home and garden once a year to all the Aberdeen courthouse employees and their families for a day of fun and fellowship. Of course, former law clerks always return for the event, too – not because they are required to, but because Judge Aycock has always treated them well and made them feel special and welcomed. In that setting, it is more than clear that Judge Aycock does not view people based on their job title but the basis of their character.

Similarly, she does not expect special treatment based on her job title. Sharion Aycock may be known to more people on a first-name basis than any other judge in the federal judiciary. "This is Sharion" or, if it's formal, "Sharion Aycock," is how she introduces herself on a phone call. And while it may seem small, the way she simply introduces herself as who she is, without any reference to her professional stature, reflects her genuine desire to see other people for who they are.

B. Be Passionate for Public Service

Sharion Aycock is, at the very heart of her, a public servant. Judge Aycock is very cognizant that there are so many in our community that need a little help. It comes as no surprise to Aycock clerks when the Judge organizes a "COE" event to help paint pottery for a community fundraiser or bake treats to be delivered to the local nursing home for an upcoming

holiday. She takes on multiple local leadership roles, whether it be in her church, her hometown of Fulton, or her “second” home in Aberdeen, and she encourages her clerks to embody that same mentality.

Judge Aycock is very conscientious of the working conditions of the employees of the court. She is mindful of job satisfaction and often reaches out to employees to discover ways to make their work more satisfactory. She understands that making the court function well and collaboratively is the most important way to make sure that the Court as a whole can achieve its mission. She views herself as part of that collective. This attitude is at the center of her public servant’s heart. She cares about the cases, but she really cares about the people behind the cases. Her passion for the work and for the people is contagious; she truly leads by example. Nobody is going to outwork Sharion Aycock.

C. Stay True to Precision, Detail, and the Law

Professionally, working with Judge Aycock is incredibly freeing. Clerks have never been confined to find a way to get to a particular disposition but were encouraged to critically analyze the arguments and proof presented before applying the law. Judge Aycock makes an effort to follow the law. She encourages her clerks to read the law and follow the law, no matter the outcome. She understood and imparted to us that this would likely be our last opportunity to be impartial about the law – to get it right without the mantle of advocacy.

She understands the gravity of the position of being a law clerk, not just educationally or as a career booster, but as an opportunity to look into the judiciary. She understands the advantage the position affords and takes her time to make the right choice of who to hire into her chambers. Despite all of this, however, the greatest advantage to being a law clerk for Judge Aycock is not only gaining insight into the state of the law or even becoming a better writer, it is the privilege of becoming a part of Sharion Aycock’s world – this includes being welcomed into her home, meeting and spending time with her family, as well as loving her and being loved by her not just during the two-year term, but for a lifetime.

D. No Case Really Ends at Judgment

Over the past several years, Judge Aycock has devoted a large chunk of her time to developing and instituting a Reentry Court program in the Northern District of Mississippi. Alarmed by how many defendants were making repeat visits to her courtroom, Judge Aycock decided to focus on offenders re-entering society. She formed a core team comprised of a prosecutor, public defenders, probation officers, a magistrate judge, and the

local halfway house director to create a program using Moral Reconciliation Therapy to help those newly released from the federal prison reacclimate to society. With intensive therapy and numerous community-based programs, these participants meet monthly with the Judge and the Core Team. Judge Aycock gives these participants her personal cell phone number and frequently calls them to check in on their progress in the program. She has an earnest desire to stop the cycle of recidivism and help offenders lead productive, law-abiding lives post-release. Judge Aycock has a profound understanding and empathy that these people have not been afforded the opportunities that many of us have. Through the Reentry Program, Judge Aycock is a champion and supporter of people who have never before had anyone in their corner. She really cares about the people behind the cases.

E. Remember Where You Came From

Judge Aycock actively engages her law clerks about their personal lives. She wants to meet your family, she wants to know about them, she wants updates, she wants to know where you came from so she can help you figure out where you are going. Law clerks have been known to bring their parents, sometimes grandparents, through Chambers for a visit. She knows the names of her former and current clerks' spouses, children, and family members. She knows because she has always cared enough to ask. It is no surprise that so many Aycock clerks remain in public service as a career even if they had no intentions of doing so when they started with her. She is always there to discuss anything you have going on; sometimes, it feels like she really enjoys those conversations more than anything. One of her favorite responses is: "so what are you going to do about that?" She listens and provides the tools to decide what is best for you, but she always wants to remind you of the context and the other people impacted by your decisions. She is the best kind of mentor—she wants you to do what is right, and what is right for you, no matter how it impacts her.

F. Remember to Have Fun

When you put a few mid-twenties Type A law clerks in, most likely their first job, you get a few shenanigans. Several of the law clerks over the years have been known for their practical jokes. Judge Aycock was always very gracious in allowing the pranks to continue and laughing along when one was particularly funny. Clerks' offices have been post-it noted, clerks have been known to jump out of boxes to scare unsuspecting coworkers, and one clerk's office was wrapped in plastic wrap during a vacation. Although getting the work finished takes priority, her willingness

to go along with these jokes makes day to day life in Chambers much more enjoyable.

III. CONCLUSION

These are only a few of many lessons learned through working with Judge Aycock. Generally speaking, there's much to be said about being selected for a federal clerkship. It is prestigious and pays bi-weekly. But there's more to be said about clerking for Judge Aycock. It is prestigious, and it pays in dividends of friendship, family, wise counsel and love, long after the term is complete.

