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CHIEF JUDGE SHARION AYCOCK: ROLE MODEL, MENTOR, AND FRIEND

*The Honorable Kristi H. Johnson**

Sharion Aycock was born in Tremont, a small town in north Mississippi. She has lived her entire life in Mississippi and will unabashedly claim her “Mississippi girl” status. Those who have met her will agree that she effortlessly commands any room she enters. She is warm, engaging, and kind. Because of her unassuming, down-to-earth nature, no one would ever suspect that she is a historical figure in Mississippi and a trailblazer for women. But she is.

Judge Aycock made Mississippi history on October 4, 2007, when she became the first female Article III judge in the State. Seven years later, she made history again when she became the first female Chief Judge of either of the federal district courts in the State. Her journey to this historic role began at Mississippi College School of Law where she served as co-editor of the Law Review and graduated second in her law school class. Following graduation, she practiced with a small law firm in Fulton, Mississippi and later served as the Itawamba County prosecuting attorney. In 2003, Judge Aycock was elected as a judge for the Circuit Court for the First Circuit Court District. She was the first female circuit court judge in the history of that district.

After Judge Aycock served five years on the state-court bench, United States District Court Judge Glen H. Davidson took senior status, opening a position on the federal court. Senator Thad Cochran’s office called Judge Aycock and asked if she was interested in a federal judgeship. She was. Following her interview with Senator Cochran, she went to Washington, D.C. for an interview with White House counsel and Department of Justice attorneys. Like most people who encounter Judge Aycock, the White House attorneys were impressed by her. She sailed through the confirmation process, and the Senate unanimously confirmed her nomination. And the rest, as they say, is history. Judge Aycock has been on the federal bench over thirteen years now.

Shortly after Judge Aycock’s confirmation, I interviewed with her for a clerkship in her chambers. At that time, I was a second-year law student at Mississippi College School of Law. I’ll confess that I had no

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idea what a federal clerkship entailed, why I should interview for one, and if I was even qualified. At the insistence of Jim Rosenblatt, Mississippi College School of Law's Dean then, I made the trek to Aberdeen to interview with Judge Aycock. During the interview, she asked me more questions about me as a person than my academics. She seemed impressed that I was juggling law school and raising my stepson alone at times, given that my husband worked in Alaska for long stints. She was friendly, engaging, and excited about her recent appointment to the federal bench. I noticed on her bookshelf a plaque that read, "Well Behaved Women Rarely Make History." That piqued my interest.

Any reservations I had about interviewing for a clerkship faded away upon meeting Judge Aycock, and I immediately knew that, if she would have me, I wanted to be a part of her legacy. Fortunately, she offered me the job. Judge Aycock later told me that she knew if I could raise a child with the pressures of law school and still graduate at the top of my class, I could handle anything she could throw at me during a clerkship.

I spent the first two years of my legal career clerking for Judge Aycock. I watched in awe as she effortlessly ruled on evidentiary objections from the bench without hesitation and firmly, but politely, reined in attorneys seeking to test her patience. I observed as she interacted with court staff. She spoke daily to the court security officers, the cleaning staff, and clerk's office employees. She asked about their backgrounds and families. She remembered the names of their spouses and children and would ask how they were doing.

I recall the self-inflicted feelings of inadequacy I experienced at the beginning of the clerkship. I questioned whether I had the necessary skills to assist her. I certainly did not want to let her down. She quickly dispelled my concerns. Judge Aycock treated me as an equal. She trusted my judgment and valued my opinion. I recall a weekend, or two, at her dining table working through legal issues and preparing for trial. In one highly contentious case destined for trial, the parties filed dozens of motions in limine that required multiple hearings. We worked countless hours to research and prepare for the hearings. During one of those hearings, she placed a chair for me beside her on the bench so we could confer and move quickly through the motions. Her confidence in me strengthened my confidence in myself.

Don't get me wrong—Judge Aycock corrected me when I made mistakes. She helped me polish my rough edges in a way that didn't hamper my self-esteem or force me to compromise who I am. She stressed the importance of integrity, and that as lawyers, we needed to fiercely guard our reputations with the court and the bar. I watched as she treated all litigants, regardless of financial or social status, fairly and impartially and

with dignity and respect. She had no agenda. She simply wanted to reach the outcome the law required.

Through the years I have leaned on Judge Aycock for career advice and sometimes personal advice. She's offered wise counsel but always left the ultimate decision to me. It was my life after all, and I would have to live with the decision. She celebrated my professional accomplishments. She sent hand-written notes and even flowers on big career events, such as my first trial and new jobs. My experience was not unique. She invests time and energy into all of her current and former law clerks and makes them feel special. I remember one week when I called Judge Aycock, she had spoken to four other former clerks that week alone. All had reached out to her for guidance. No matter how busy she is, she always makes time for her law clerks.

No Tribute to Judge Aycock would be complete without mentioning her husband, Randy. Randy is a supportive, loving spouse, and an all-around nice guy. He is proud of the Judge's career accomplishments and is not remotely intimidated by her position or historic status. As attorneys jockey for her attention at legal functions, Randy is always close by with a smile and sometimes an eye roll. I recently read a Law Review Article written by Lisa Blatt, who is a former United States Solicitor General and well-known appellate attorney. The article discussed her thoughts about successful female attorneys. In it, she said that "behind every successful woman are the many men in her life who just got out of her way."¹ That statement made me think of Randy, and my husband too for that matter. Strong women are like strong coffee—not everyone is a fan. Luckily, Judge Aycock has a husband who supports her career and is proud of her many accomplishments. I'm thankful we have that in common.

As a recently confirmed federal judge, I am working with my first group of law clerks. As I have interacted with them, I am flooded with feelings of nostalgia of my time clerking for Judge Aycock. My hope for their clerkship experience is that I can impact their lives in some way like Judge Aycock did mine. I look forward to hearing about their exciting life events following their clerkship: marriages, children, and the late-night calls seeking career advice.

Life doesn't always play out how we expect or want. But I have realized countless times in my life that God places me right where I need to be, right when I need to be there. Serving as a law clerk for Judge Aycock was exactly where God wanted me. She influenced me at a critical time in my legal career. She showed me how to work hard and treat others with dignity and respect. That experience gave me the confidence I needed to

1. Lisa Blatt, Reflections of a Lady Lawyer, *Women & Law*, 57-64 [Joint Publication February 2020].

pursue career opportunities I would have shied away from otherwise. I am forever grateful to Judge Aycock for teaching me to trust my judgment and be myself. Because of her guidance and influence, I can not only call her my role model, mentor, and friend, but also my colleague. Thank you, Judge.