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REFLECTIONS ON JUDICIAL LEADERSHIP

*David Crews**

The volume and enormity of matters that must be juggled by a chief judge in federal court are staggering. Thankfully, Chief Judge Sharion Aycock's work ethic is legendary and is more than a match for the demands of the job. She is known, on occasion, to keep court going well past 5:00 in the evening to resolve court matters and, on one occasion, kept a jury out until midnight to secure a decision.

A wonderful and revealing story conveys volumes about her ferocious work ethic and her character as a Judge.

When Judge Allen Pepper died unexpectedly, Judge Aycock and all of our District Judges took over his cases to ensure fair and seamless justice. Judge Aycock quickly scheduled a trip to our Delta Courthouse to handle matters that required immediate attention.

When Sally Freeman, a wonderful person who served as Judge Pepper's courtroom deputy, learned that Judge Aycock would be coming to Greenville, she phoned me and, with urgency, announced that she needed to retire immediately – that very day, in fact. I said, "Sally, please don't retire. We need you. You are a talented, experienced staffer. I need you to cover Judge Aycock's court next week when she travels to Greenville."

Sally persisted and exclaimed, "You don't understand, Dave, I need to retire this very minute. You are sending that Lady Judge who works 'til midnight down here. I'm almost 70 years old, and I can't work 'til midnight." After stifling a laugh, I assured Sally that it was unlikely Judge Aycock would be working until midnight on these matters and that I would confer with the Judge about her concerns. Whereupon Judge Aycock, who understands human nature and cares deeply about everyone in our Court, assured me that I could allay Sally's concerns.

* David Crews is the Clerk of Court for the U.S. District Court in the Northern District of Mississippi. He is a former United States Marshal who spent 12 years with the U.S. Justice Department before joining the Court. In 1982 David worked with Governor William Winter to secure a pioneering piece of legislation that brought a statewide system of kindergartens and compulsory school attendance to Mississippi for the first time. In his spare time David produced a feature length documentary film, *The Toughest Job*, which won an Emmy for Best Historical Documentary. He is the author of *The Mississippi Book of Quotations*, which is in its second printing. David graduated magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee.

Ever since that conversation with Sally, I regularly and admiringly refer to Judge Aycock as “The Lady Judge who works ‘til midnight.” I often introduce her using that revealing moniker, which generally gets quizzical looks until I explain the background, whereupon it often elicits a knowing nod or an admiring chuckle.

Chief Judge Aycock is known as a driven person as a judge and as a community leader. Within her family, she is a nurturing parent, grandparent, and daughter. Within our court, everyone recognizes how deeply she cares about every Judge, every staffer, every custodian, and everyone who comes within her orbit.

The role of a Chief U.S. District Judge is demanding. Judicial responsibilities, administrative chores, personnel matters, leadership duties all demand attention. The job is no sport for the short-winded. Given the General Services Administration’s neglect of two of our courthouses, it is especially demanding in the Northern District of Mississippi, requiring immense energy, understanding, talent, and resolve to navigate the many challenges we face.

Especially revealing of Judge Aycock’s leadership brand is her relentless effort to secure a Congressional appropriation to construct a new U.S. Courthouse in Greenville. Simultaneously she worked doggedly to ensure funding for a complete renovation of our Aberdeen Courthouse.

The current Greenville Courthouse was rated by the U.S. Marshals as one of the least secure federal courthouses in the nation. The Aberdeen Courthouse was shuttered after a black mold outbreak led several Judges and staffers to become dangerously ill. She confronted both dire situations head-on, making multiple trips to Washington to meet with Senators and other key officials. She bird dogged these construction matters over many years until the funds were secured to ensure a safe environment for federal court. Nothing less would satisfy Judge Aycock.

I will never forget the pure joy on the Judge’s face when Senator Cochran alerted us that the funding for the Greenville Courthouse would be forthcoming. That was the culmination of years of phone calls, letters, emails, and personal meetings, all in the service of a strong, safe, professional judicial presence in the Northern District of Mississippi.

Of equal importance to successfully managing the complexities of the Chief Judge’s role are a sense of humor and a generosity of spirit. Judge Aycock’s sense of humor and ready smile are paired with a no-nonsense resolve to accomplish goals in service of a strong court that meets the needs of the bar and the public.

You can scarcely imagine the glee Judge Aycock exhibits during gatherings of court personnel at Christmas and similar gatherings. The same generosity and enthusiasm are on display at our annual Districtwide staff meeting to ensure every staff member has input in efforts to strengthen

court procedures and administrative functions. She greets everyone with an enthusiasm that is genuine and infectious.

Of significant value is the zeal and love with which Judge Aycock mentors her law clerks. Her talented law clerks have invariably succeeded upon leaving their tenure in her chambers. They have gone on to successful careers in private practice, as federal prosecutors, exceptional court administrators, and notably as a federal judge. No doubt they all came in with significant skills and acumen. But they departed with seasoning and understanding under the caring guidance of a special judge. Life lessons abound when you work for Judge Aycock. But she is more than a Judge to her flock of staffers. She is a proud mama.

Chief Judge Aycock is a judicial force of nature, driven to accomplish as much as possible and relentless in pursuit of the strongest possible court.

