

President's Message

by Manuel A. Capsalis



The Ways of a Gentle Warrior

HARRY TRUMAN ONCE SAID, “Men make history and not the other way around . . . Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better.” There are perhaps but a few well-known individuals in our Virginia legal profession in the past fifty or so years who arguably deserve such praise. There is one person who undoubtedly has earned his place in this pantheon, yet, because of his modest and humble demeanor, he remains unknown to many. His name is Clarence M. Dunnville Jr.

I first met Clarence in December 2007, when I attended the annual awards presentation of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, an organization formed in 1963 at the direction of President John F. Kennedy to engage the bar to provide legal services to confront racial discrimination and to promote equal justice through

service in the cause of equal justice under law.”

As was described in his biography presented at the ceremony, Clarence became actively involved in the cause of civil rights while a student at Morgan State University in the 1950s, participating in picketing of segregated theaters and restaurants, and as a part of the famous lunch counter sit-ins in Baltimore, which eventually led to their desegregation. While in college, he had the privilege of being present in the U.S. Supreme Court to hear the argument of Thurgood Marshall and Spotswood W. Robinson III in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy appointed him as an assistant U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York. He served on Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey’s Task Force on Youth Motivation. In the 1960s he served as a volunteer civil

shotgun at Clarence’s head to facilitate his timely departure.

He was a cofounder of the Council of Concerned Black Executives and the Association for Integration in Management. He also cofounded the Oliver White Hill Foundation, where he continues to serve. Over the years, he has been the recipient of a great many awards and accolades. He has argued cases too numerous to list, advocating for equal justice and protecting the rights of the disadvantaged. He continues to maintain an active practice in Richmond.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “The reward of a thing well done is to have done it.” A person of Clarence’s stature certainly would be excused if he wanted the world to take note of his achievements. Clarence is not that type of person. Now in his mid-seventies, Clarence is as active and energetic as ever, going about his business, fighting for justice.

He continues on undeterred, even in the face of personal adversity. On January 3, his beloved wife of forty-two years, Norine, passed away. Just a few days later, awaiting her funeral, Clarence dutifully attended a meeting of the bar’s Diversity Task Force, where, true to form, he was fully engaged, the giver of sage advice. One week later, politely declining the offer of a continuance while he mourned the loss of his wife, Clarence appeared before the Supreme Court of Virginia to argue for a constitutional civil right to counsel for the indigent in cases involving fundamental rights, such as parental

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the rule of law. Among the recipients that December evening was Clarence Dunnville, who received the Segal-Tweed Founders Award, which is presented to an individual “who has displayed outstanding leadership and

rights attorney in Jackson, Mississippi. In 1967, as a “Mississippi Attorney,” Clarence was invited to leave the township of Marks by a deputy sheriff, who emphasized the request by aiming a

rights. By all accounts, he was as eloquent and persuasive as ever.

As David Bernhard, one of his co-counsel explained, "Being in the presence of Clarence and particularly interacting with him in the context of the law is an educational experience with few parallels. Whether it is as a warrior for civil rights, accomplished lawyer, promoter of innovative ways to teach the law and diversity, leader of the Oliver White Hill Foundation, or advocate for the rights of the poor, Clarence has been in the forefront challenging the law to be a bit better and to live up to ideals espoused which are yet unachieved." This recent case before the Supreme Court was but one more example of the difficult and sometimes unenviable tasks he has taken on in a legal career spanning five decades.

It is a job he assumes without complaint and always with good cheer. As Richmond-based attorney W. David Harless recently told me, "I cannot recall a time when I have been with Clarence that he has not been overflowing with encouragement and grace. For Clarence, the focus is nurturing relationships, with friends and stranger alike. He expresses unconditional concern without preconception." Kathy Mays Coleman describes him as having a "marvelous quality of making you feel like you are his friend, immediately." As Rodney A. Coggin, publications director of the Virginia State Bar, described, "It is easy to forget about his wealth of experience fighting the toughest fights in the name of fairness and civil rights. So I always ask him what he's up to and every conversation leads to something important and enriching."

I encountered all this firsthand in December 2007 when I attended the ceremony for presentation of the Segal-Tweed Founders Award. I had never met Clarence and knew very little about him. At a ceremony honoring his years of advocacy and achievement, at a time when the focus of the occasion obvi-



President Manuel A. Capsalis (left) congratulated Dunnville (center) and his son Andrew Dunnville of Arlington, at the awards presentation of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law in December 2007.

ously should have been entirely on him, he did something that I will never forget. To my great shock, Clarence introduced me to the crowd. If truth be told, I felt somewhat embarrassed, as I was hon-

our profession. Luckily for us, he is very much our living future as well. He continues on, as Emerson stated, content in knowing that the reward of things well done is simply to have done them.

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He is a living history of our profession.*

ored just to be in the same room with this giant of the law. I was nothing compared to him. After the ceremony, he introduced me to his entire family, and we had a long, wonderful conversation. From that timeless evening, I have had the privilege of considering him a dear friend and mentor.

If you have not had the pleasure of meeting Clarence Dunnville, I hope you someday do so. He is a living history of

As much as anyone I have ever met, he personifies the very best of our calling. As David Bernhard best put it, "Clarence is a walking history of achievement and the epitome of moral leadership by example. He is a jewel in our Virginia legal community." Our profession is so much the better because of him.