

Roby Greene Janney: A Remembrance

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When Roby Greene Janney died on April 29, 2007, at age 87, he left a legacy of collegiality and compassion, of prosperity through perseverance, of dedication and devotion to our profession. But he took with him our last tangible connection to an era when law was a calling and not just an occupation.

Journalist Tom Brokaw called them The Greatest Generation. Roby was one of them, and exemplified all that they represent to us today.

Roby, affectionately known as “Papa” Janney at the Page County Courthouse, was possessed of a gentle character and subtle humor, dignity and decorum, probity, and devotion to his family and his faith. He was old school. You would not know, nor would he tell you, that he was among the Marines who witnessed the raising of the American flag on Iwo Jima in 1945. Mr. Janney repaid his good fortune by living each day as a gift to be savored and repaid with goodwill to his fellow man.

Educated at the University of Virginia, he chose to settle in Luray, at the time hardly more than a village and today still a small town of fewer than twenty-four thousand souls.

Mr. Janney was not about flash and glitter. While others were building stone-and-glass empires, he built a following that made him a local icon, synonymous with the law and its processes. His method was to persevere and to care. Any student of practice-building would perceive in his simple formula

the path to success and personal fulfillment. His knowledge of the families of Page County was encyclopedic. In his routine query on meeting a client or examining a witness—“What’s your daddy’s name?”—was an understanding of all he was to hear and a road map for the questions to be asked to learn the things he was not hearing. Few out-of-town counsel tried cases successfully in Page County without first consulting Papa Janney. More’s the pity if he was on the other side.

Mr. Janney passed his practice along to his son and saw him grow and prosper and become the attorney he would most want at his side—a reward that few can savor. Surely Mr. Janney savored this, even as his vigor declined.

He lived his faith, even if as a rock-ribbed Southern Baptist he was a little hard on the Methodists. He practiced what he preached and he was, without doubt, one of the most generous attorneys in the local bar. Judge John J. McGrath Jr., eulogizing his former law partner, recounted that recipients of Mr. Janney’s monetary largess were legion and in many cases never knew the identity of their benefactor. In a day of nonprofits and deductible contributions, he preferred to bestow his gifts on those he personally knew to be in need.

He became a vital force within the community, leading many organizations. He gave back in full measure even as he served the community from his modest offices on South Court Street.

His relations with the bench were an extension of his character. He began practice in 1948, when dockets were not so overwhelming that judges didn’t have time for informal chats with lawyers. He knew the judges. He liked them. And they liked him. Roby didn’t win every case he tried. But he was unfailingly polite in victory or defeat to the court, to court personnel, and to opposing counsel. This conduct builds a reservoir of good will that can only be the envy of others less concerned about such niceties, and a model to be emulated by those wise enough to watch and to learn.

For Roby, mentoring was a part of who he was. His door was open, and any young lawyer was welcome to drop by for advice and counsel. He said to me, on the day I opened my practice in a converted garage, that I was welcome to use his library any time I liked, but he wouldn’t send me any cases. When five years later he sent me one of his long-time clients whose hotly contested case he couldn’t ethically handle, I knew I had been given a blessing of approval to be coveted as much as any award I could ever receive.

He was a marriage officiant by circuit court degree, and took special delight in performing ceremonies in his law office when a young couple, overcome with Luray’s beauty and romance, would hurry to the clerk’s office for a license and then half a block further to his door. One couple was a groom with

Janney continued on page 57

a Marine haircut and a demure bride in a yellow silk wedding kimono. Learning they had no plans for photographs, Roby would not let them depart until he had his faithful assistant, Jane Nichols, run down to the local

drug store for Polaroid film so he could memorialize their union. Yes, Papa Janney was a romantic, too.

The long career of Roby Greene Janney is an inspiration to the profession. We

who knew him were privileged to have him walk among us. We shall not see his like again. 🙏