

## My Journey

by The Honorable Walter S. Felton Jr.

Recently, I had occasion to reflect on my journey in the law. That journey was one that I had never planned to take, and looking back made me aware of what a special journey it has been so far. In those reflections, I wished for a moment to tell my parents and family that they are my heroes, but failed in the many opportunities to do so when I could, 'til now in some cases it's too late.

My parents were married late in life, and were of humble means. They gave my sister and me the understanding that lacking some material things in life did not equate with being poor. They taught us that we should always give our best, even if we didn't particularly like what we had been given to do, and that knowing that we had done our best on that occasion would always bring a sense of accomplishment, and often better opportunities with better rewards. While our clothing was not always stylish, it was clean. Our home was always neat and comfortable, and our food nourishing. Mom and Dad instilled in us the values of a good education, and an understanding that we would have to use that gift to make our ways through life. My sister retired after many years of teaching elementary school.

Somewhat surprising to me, now, is that I never had any strong desire to go to law school, or even had the thought of being a lawyer, until late in my college days. As I ended my final year of college, I knew that as a result of my being in the Reserve Officers Training Corps, I would be commissioned a second lieutenant in the Army, serve a few years during the Vietnam Conflict, and then try to find my life's work.

Knowing some of my friends from college had gone to law school, I decided to take the then equivalent of the LSAT, and to apply to a few law schools to see if any would take a chance on me when my service was completed. Surprisingly, I was reasonably successful at both efforts. Just before graduation, I was able to get a deferment of the scheduled military service to attend the University of Richmond Law School, able to arrange

for some financing to pay for that endeavor, and headed to my first year. Following graduation, I went into the Army Judge Advocate General's Corps for a four-year tour. By then I was married and our first son was born.

My primary military legal job was representing soldiers who had been wounded in Vietnam, and helping those soldiers obtain benefits as they returned to society, tragically less than whole in body and spirit. Those years have remained on my mind as I have traveled through life, especially realizing the sacrifice those young soldiers had given as they returned with life-long disabilities impacting not only themselves, but also their families.

When my active military service was completed, I returned with my young family, now grown to two sons, to begin the general practice of law in my home town of Suffolk. I recall vividly my first case, a reckless driving ticket, and spending all afternoon the day before the trial reading every case on reckless driving that I could find, for a total fee, including court appearance, of \$50. Sports activities for the kids consumed every extra moment, with pictures taken then now bringing refreshed memories of the importance of those activities to both the children and us as parents.

After that general practice of some nine years, several unusual turns of fate, or perhaps "opportunity" as my parents would designate it, took me to the faculty of the William & Mary Law School, where my faculty duties included providing training programs for the commonwealth's prosecutors, and teaching several law school core courses. While serving in that capacity, I was granted periodic leaves of absence to serve as deputy attorney general, senior counsel to the attorney general, and as counsel to the governor. The folks at William & Mary were gracious to allow me to serve in those other capacities, while saving a spot for me when those sojourns were completed.

I had just returned to the William & Mary Law faculty, when fate again inter-

vened. A vacancy occurred on the Virginia Court of Appeals. I was elected to be a judge of that court, where I continue to serve. My wife, patient as she has been, remarked that I should find one job and keep it. I told her that I thought this one would be the last one.

My journey through the law, like so many others who have begun the trek, has been one that I would have never mapped out or expected to travel. Along the way, I was given opportunities I never anticipated. I was blessed with parents who taught that one must always declare honesty and integrity in dealing with others to be the guiding principle, and to understand that failure to do so results in a loss of respect, not easily, if ever, repaired.

Each of us who has undertaken the journey of life in the law has benefited immeasurably from those who have gone before to build guiding paths for us. Our parents and our immediate families have given so much that we could give to others in the law. We must never forget their sacrifices to allow us to do what we do and have done with our lives. We need to thank them as often as we can, while we can, not with just words but by enjoying the special benefits of life with them, so special to us. They are indeed the wind beneath our wings, who raise us up and give us strength.

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**The Honorable Walter S. Felton Jr.** is the Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals of Virginia. He is on the board of the section of the Virginia State Bar's Education of Lawyers in Virginia and chaired the Indigent Defense Training Initiative. Judge Felton previously served as deputy attorney general of Virginia and law professor at the Marshall-Wythe School of Law.