

Just Don't Put Anybody in Jail Until Monday

Based on an interview of Bill Stephens by John D. Whittington in October 2014

William Roy Stephens grew up in Dunbar, West Virginia. He played football and basketball at Dunbar High School. Bill began his college career at Marshall University and as a freshman walked on and made the basketball team. He eventually transferred to Morris Harvey College (now the University of Charleston) where he also played on the basketball team.

After graduation Bill thought about attending West Virginia University School of Law, however, through a strange twist of fate he ended up at the University of Richmond Law School. While nearing college graduation Bill was undecided as to what career path he wanted to take. He spoke with one of his professors who advised him to go to law school. At the time, Bill did not know any lawyers other than one of his childhood neighbors whom he had never talked with "because he was lawyer."

Regardless, one of Bill's classmates went to Richmond Law School and spoke of it highly so Bill applied. He was accepted and graduated in 1965. Bill and his wife, Jean moved to Manassas in August of 1965. Before moving to Prince William County he went to the Richmond Unemployment Commission. At a group interview for the C & O Railroad, Bill said he was hired because he "was the only one with my hand up both times," when the group was asked who could read and who could write.

Bill's legal career began when he was hired by Leonard Lonas, a prominent Prince William County lawyer. Bill credits Judge Herman Whisenant, Jr., as the reason he came to Prince William County. Leonard Lonas was Judge Whisenant's brother-in-law. Judge Whisenant introduced Bill to Mr. Lonas and Bill practiced with him for about one year. Bill began earning around \$400 a month. Once Mr. Lonas found out that Bill's wife was pregnant he increased his salary to \$425.00 per month. When Bill began practicing in Prince William County he believes he was around the 24th lawyer in the county. His colleagues included Selwyn Smith and Frank Hoss, (both eventual Circuit Court Judges), Stanley Owens, Lacey Compton, Tom Underwood, Tom Beane, Bud Latimer and Ed Flournoy. Bill believes that he started practicing one day before Ed and therefore, always had "seniority" on him in the Bar. The Bar Association was a much smaller group at that time and you not only knew the lawyers you practiced with but their families as well.

After Bill began practicing on his own he felt like he was somewhat of a "pseudo-associate" to many lawyers who would give him work such as Selwyn Smith, W. Hill Brown, Harold Hirsch as well as Turner Smith and Jim Davenport. One attorney Bill considered as a mentor in his early days was Paul Ebert. Paul was an Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney under then Commonwealth Attorney Selwyn Smith. Frank Hoss was also an Assistant Prosecutor. All those jobs then were part-time, meaning the lawyers, in addition to Commonwealth Attorney, had a private practice as well. When Selwyn Smith decided to run for the State Senate, Paul Ebert ran for and became Prince William County's Commonwealth Attorney. He started on January 1, 1968 and along with William Murphy (later General District Court Judge) and Ed Fox, Bill was sworn in as one of the first three Assistant Commonwealth Attorneys to Mr. Ebert. Bill was only 27 at that time, somewhat younger than Murphy and Fox, and therefore was delegated to handle the "dog being in the yard cases and stuff." From that start Bill Stephens built a reputation of being one of the premier criminal law attorneys in Prince William County.

When Bill started practicing law Prince William was not in its own Circuit, but was in a Circuit with the City of Alexandria and Fairfax County. Judge Arthur Sinclair was Prince William County's primary Circuit Judge and Judge Paul Brown and Judge Bernard Jennings would ride the Circuit as well. Judge's Albert Bryan Jr., and James Cacheris (who were then Circuit Court Judges from Fairfax) eventually both went on to the Federal Bench in Alexandria. Judge Percy Thornton, Jr., who practiced with Stanley Owens, became our second permanent Circuit Judge.

Throughout the years Bill has held many titles with the Prince William County Bar Association. He has been Treasurer, Board Member and President of our Association. Bill was the first President to begin publication of a Bar Newsletter. In the early days of Bill's practice, Prince William County was quite rural. Route 234 was only two lanes. There was only one service station on Route 234, an ESSO station, all the way out to Route 15. Westgate Shopping Center was built and had a fair number of stores; however, there was not another building other than farm houses along 234 from that shopping center. Bill recalls that to get to Judge Smith's farm, one had to drive part way

on a dirt road. The first section of Prince William Hospital had just been built and Bill's three daughters, Amy, Ann Marie and Sara were born there. At Manaport Plaza on Route 234 there was a little airport with a grass runway. People would skydive there on the weekends. Sudley Club had opened and that was one of the first facilities Bill and his family joined. There was no Manassas Mall at that time.

Bill was involved in many service oriented clubs in our community including the Jaycees, Kiwanis, and March of Dimes (which he chaired at one point). He was President of the Prince William Mental Health Association. That association eventually became part of Northern Virginia Mental Health, which was displaced by the Community Services Board. Bill was also involved in the organization that pre-dated ASAP (Alcohol Safety Action Program) which he chaired.

Bill also served as a Substitute Judge from Prince William County beginning in 1984 until January 1, 2014 when he passed the torch. Bill recalls how his tenor as a Judge began in 1973 with a phone call from then Prosecutor for the City of Manassas Park, James Robeson (later Juvenile & Domestic Relations Judge). Bill received a call one day from Jim and was asked "Do you want to be the Manassas Park Judge?" Jim went on to indicate that their regular Judge had left the area and there was a need pending that day. Bill said he would be happy to do it, and Robeson said "There is just one thing. You won't be sworn in until next week so don't put anybody in jail until Monday!"

Bill is approaching 50 years as a member of the Virginia State Bar (August 6, 2015). He still enjoys the practice of law and attributes this to the members of his firm, especially Dick Boatwright, with whom he has practiced since 1974.