

Helping Youth Find Their Way

Based on an interview of Judge William Alan Becker by Alissa N. Hudson in January 2016

William Alan Becker was born and raised in Fairfax County, VA. He went to James Madison High School along with classmate (Chief Justice) Donald Lemons. His father was a lawyer and “worked for most of his career for the Air Transport Association.” Though he never actually practiced law, he “felt that a law school background was a good background for any occupation.” Alan took his father’s advice. He attended college at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, and while there, enrolled in Air Force ROTC. He graduated in 1970 as a Second Lieutenant with a Bachelor’s Degree in Anthropology, and “they let me go to law school.” So he attended Law School at Washington University in St. Louis, (his father’s undergraduate and law school alma mater), graduating in 1973. With the Vietnam War winding down at that time, the Air Force gave him options for fulfilling his service obligation, so his tour of duty was at Bolling Air Force base in the JAG Office.

While waiting for the results of his Bar Exam, Becker began clerking for a solo practitioner in Seven Corners. One day, the attorney gave Becker “a file and said, please go down to Alexandria Circuit Court and get this case continued for me.” Becker goes, finds opposing counsel, discusses the continuance and realizes the other attorney isn’t going to agree. “So we go up, and he starts telling the judge about how he wants to go forward. And I said, well, judge, I’m here at the request of the lawyer I work for just to get a continuance.” The judge decides to move forward with the case. Becker points out, “I haven’t gotten my Bar results.” The judge peers at him over the bench and says, “You’ll do fine.” It turns out the case was a pendent lite hearing and the judge didn’t really need Becker’s input. Practicing without a license, even with the permission of the court, is not how most law careers begin.

Following the clerkship, Becker was looking for work in surrounding jurisdictions when he got a call from Thomas O. Beane. Their firm was “looking for a lawyer because Norb Beville and Ron Eakin had just left.” The firm was Owens, Underwood and Beane: Stanley Owens, one of our founding fathers, Tom Underwood and Thomas Beane. Bob Coppock was there as well. Becker reflected that Coppock “was meticulous, a wonderful lawyer”, and went on to say, “If I have a principal mentor, it was Tom Underwood because he was the trial lawyer.” Stanley Owens served in the legislature at the time and was “just a fine Virginia gentleman. He was a delight to work with and he was the rainmaker. Everybody came to Stanley Owens. Thomas Beane was a historian, and did a lot of real estate settlements and estate work.” Becker joined the firm, and came “to know a lot of members in the local Bar.”

One of the first court-appointed cases Becker recalled concerned a client who was charged with, among other things, “abducting a minor, which was his girlfriend, who was happily married to someone else.” The client was brought to court in ankle shackles, seated in the back of the courtroom, and while there, asked “one of the deputy sheriffs if he could have a pen. Well, [my client] knew how to use a pen to undo the ankle shackles, so he unpinned one and put it on the other one underneath his pants, and at the first opportunity, just bolted out the door. The deputy shot at my client from the courthouse steps as he fled, the bullet hitting a flower pot on the alley windowsill of Selwyn Smith’s office building.” He was ultimately apprehended “on the railroad tracks.” Upon reentering the courtroom, heavily chained, Becker requested a continuance because his client was “still huffing and puffing from running for his life.” The court summarily denied the request.

Becker worked for Owens, Underwood and Beane from 1974 to 1985, when Stanley Owens passed away. (Side note: Stanley Owens also served as the PWC Commonwealth’s Attorney from 1944 to 1960. PWC Circuit Court Judge Percy Thornton, was a former partner of Stanley Owens.)

Owens’ death precipitated a restructuring of the firm, and at the same time, John Foote, who was the County Attorney, was looking for a new hire to handle all their DSS work in juvenile court, which was of interest to Becker. So he applied for the job and was hired. While there, he also served as president of the PWC Bar Association in 1987. His president-elect was (Judge) Richard Potter. His secretary was (Judge) Mary Grace O’Brien and his treasurer was Rick Wheeler. During his term, he and his fellow officers attended one of the first Bar Leaders Institute Meetings sponsored by the VSB Conference of Local Bar Associations. Becker recalls that “it was a broadening opportunity for the leadership of the Bar.” The agenda at that meeting included public service, dealing with the press, the ABA and VSB as resources, and the MCLE and its relation to the local bar, which are all topics we continue to focus on today. “It was a real eye opener to us [about] what was going on in other bar associations, so we brought back some of the things we learned and tried to institute them here.”

Becker served two years in the County Attorney's office, and "enjoyed working in the court." When a third seat was funded in the J&DR District Court, Jim Robeson suggested that Becker "put his hat in the ring." Becker did, along with a lot of other very capable attorneys who would later join him on the bench, including Robeson. He recalls that during the Bar election to put forth an endorsed candidate for the opening, Lacey Compton, Sr., arrived to cast his vote, (another of our founding fathers), but could not participate because he had not paid his bar dues. "This is a poll tax!" he exclaimed, though he dutifully paid the required fees. Becker was appointed to the JDR Bench July 1, 1987 and served there until his retirement in 2014. His fellow judges upon taking the bench were Judges Kellam and Molinari.

Judge Becker refers to his time on the bench as a blessing. When asked what developments he has seen in the court during his tenure, he recalls significant improvements in docket management resulting in the segmented dockets we see today. He talked about the establishment of the Office of Dispute Resolution in 1992, with the help of Bob Klima, which created a structured forum for mediation prior to the preliminary hearing. He recalled the advent of C.A.S.A. (Court Appointed Special Advocates) in 1994, and how Charlie Ashton was involved in the establishment of the local office. He credits all these developments with providing tremendous benefits to "kids and families in crisis." And he gives significant credit for their development to hard work by members of the PWC Bar Association.

Becker's final comments focused on the Beat the Odds Banquet and National Adoption Day, programs that were inspired by a national focus, and found a local home in the PWC Bar with funding through the PWC Bar Foundation. He talked about how those programs celebrate the successes of county funded intervention agencies that benefit youth, and how we need to do all we can to insure that funding for those agencies continues.

In addition to his professional pursuits, Becker served as a Cub Master and then Scout Master in the Boy Scouts for about 30 years, guiding both his boys, and untold numbers of others, through the process of becoming an Eagle Scout. Even in his free time, Judge Becker enjoyed being a part of helping youth find their way, and reaching their full potential.