

Judge, Gentleman, and Comedian

Based on an interview of Judge Charles Sievers by Brad Marshall in January 2016

I recently had the pleasure of sitting down to interview the Honorable Charles Sievers, and was treated to a delightful conversation. Judge Sievers was born in Auburn, Nebraska, but grew up in Arlington after his parents' federal government jobs brought the family to this area. He attended Washington and Lee High School, and then went to college at William and Mary, where he also later attended law school. During college Chuck majored in business and was in the ROTC, which he followed with three years of service in the Army. He was in the field artillery, which took him to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, followed by flight school in Texas and Alabama.

He then went to Vietnam for a year, where he was a helicopter pilot. "I was lucky. We used to say there were two guys that flew there: there were magnet asses, and there were guys like me. Magnet asses, every time they went up, they got shot up. Other guys like me were just flying around. Some people shot at me I'm sure, because I saw tracers, and I was the only one in the air. But nobody ever hit me."

Judge Sievers then returned to Fort Bragg, and once he left the service, went back to William and Mary for law school. Chuck related that when he applied, the school was tripling its enrollment and inhabiting new space, but prior to that had actually been in the bottom of a dormitory. He attended law school intent on using the knowledge and skills he would learn in the business world. "I wasn't sold one way or the other until I got out of law school and just happened to find a job with lawyers."

Judge Sievers began his legal career in 1973. He initially applied for and was accepted into the JAG program, and then literally just hit the road knocking on law firm doors. He wanted to return to the northern Virginia area, but not all the way to Arlington. "So I went to Culpeper, Warrenton, Remington. I just stopped in law offices." He met Turner Smith through a fraternity brother. At that time, Turner Smith and Jim Davenport were solo practitioners who happened to share the same office space. They then decided to form a partnership and hire some young attorneys: Chuck Sievers, Pete Stekete, and Bill Henderson. Little did they know that two of their first associates would later go on to the General District Court Bench!

The firm of Smith and Davenport was located a 9253 Lee Avenue, just up the street from the Courthouse. Bob Bendall later replaced Bill Henderson, and the firm went on to add current Judge Lisa Baird and Tony Kostecky to its letterhead as well. The firm had a general practice. Jim did real estate principally, Turner represented municipal clients, and they handled some criminal defense, personal injury, and domestic relations work as well. The firm was representing the City of Manassas, which became an independent city in 1975, and some of the local towns as well. Jim Davenport also helped start what is now BB&T, which was Commonwealth Savings and Loan at the time. "We didn't make lawyerly sums of money, but we had a good practice. And Turner and Jim would play golf every Thursday afternoon, regardless. It was a good influence on me, I liked it."

Anyone who ever walked into Judge Sievers' Chambers knows he is an avid golfer. It was lined with what seemed like hundreds of golf balls from the various courses he played or tournaments he attended. Chuck was unique in that he would take the police officers into his Chambers to hear trials in absentia, and almost every officer still remarks about all those golf balls still to this day! He was not much of a golfer before meeting Turner and Jim, but grew to love the sport, as did his wife and children. "It's a good getaway once a week or so."

When asked about which local lawyers he formed relationships with outside of the firm, Bill Stephens was the first to come to mind (which, as you may have noticed, is a strong trend among the Bar Association's historical interviews). He also noted Jim and Stewart Robeson, Ed Flournoy, Ed McGolrick, Lacey Compton, Sr., Tom Underwood, and later Greg van Dorn became a good friend. Chuck also noted the influence that Judge Bill May had on him. "He was a good influence, I think, as far as his decorum in the courtroom." As anyone who practiced in front of Judge Sievers can attest, he was always even-keeled and unflappable, no matter the circumstances.

Chuck later served as a Special Justice, and practiced for 20 years before taking the bench in 1993. Not only did Judge May influence him, but Judge Herman Whisenant also encouraged him to become a judge. "I thought that I would be able to do more if I was a judge. I'm more attuned to, say mediation and decision making as opposed to being an advocate on one side or the other. I think I was a decent lawyer, not a great lawyer, but a decent lawyer. But you got to be an advocate there. And a judge can kind of bring it all together."

When asked about how the community has changed over the years, Judge Sievers said “it was a smaller community. It was a great community. I didn’t make tons of money, but I could walk to work. I could go to all of the kids’ stuff. You know, it was great.” When asked how the Bar has changed, he first noted the growth and how you don’t know everybody anymore. But on the other hand, it now has a great diversity to it. “99% of the attorneys are great to work with, but they all still are working toward that goal of getting the right thing done. I didn’t get that feeling in other jurisdictions ... they are trying to get it done, not necessarily the right thing done, but just get it done. It’s like golf. You learn who the good people are and who the few bad people or cheaters are, and you stay away from them. And it’s easy to do here. I really enjoy the people here. I think they are good people.” He especially loved working with the GDC clerks, which revere him, and all consider each other to be like family.



When I asked him about incorporating his trademark humor on a regular basis, Judge Sievers remarked that “somebody said if you make people laugh, you laugh with them, not at them. And you laugh at yourself. I don’t know whether you have seen the cartoons. I do doodles. They always had a bald guy with a mustache that was the subject of the humor. So I found that if you smiled a little bit, laughed a little bit with them, and made them feel more at ease, they felt like you were listening to them.”

In summing up his time on the bench, Judge Sievers said “I loved General District Court. That’s what most people think of the court system when they think about Virginia. Everybody is entitled to that respect. And if you don’t extend it to them, pretty soon they are going to be acting like they

don’t give any respect. And you do, in hindsight, really have an opportunity to represent the court system by treating people with dignity, which I think we all try to do.”