

**A TRIBUTE TO  
THE HONORABLE JAMES H. COLEMAN, JR.  
ON HIS ELEVATION TO THE  
SUPREME COURT OF NEW JERSEY\***

*Honorable William A. Dreier\*\**

When we say goodbye to one of our own upon his or her retirement from the Appellate Division, there usually is a measure of sadness, because we no longer see or work with them on a daily basis. When we face Jim Coleman's retirement from the Appellate Division, however, we have the opposite emotion. I know I speak for the court when I say that Jim's elevation to the Supreme Court of New Jersey gives each of us a feeling of unbridled joy and delight at his personal accomplishment, satisfaction that one of our own has been recognized, and elation over the new depth of experience that he can share with the Supreme Court. We also feel a sense of expectation when we look forward to his future opinions. We will not be giving up his companionship, however, because Jim still will be sitting at our chambers in Springfield.

Jim Coleman, Warren Brody,<sup>1</sup> and I go back a long way. My first vivid memory of the three of us is when we were sitting, along with Judge Jack Callahan, in the anteroom of the lawyer, in whose office we were to be interviewed, awaiting the Union County Judicial Review Committee. We all had endured a year-long process where no judges had been approved from Union County because of a disputed elevation, and finally our names officially had been proposed. Naturally, we were apprehensive. Jim, however, already had been a judge of compensation for eight years, and therefore, of the four of us, the change in his life would be the least. At the time, we were young lawyers at the start of our judicial careers, and we all had dreams.

From my many discussions with Jim over the years, I have learned that since he first started law school, Jim's dream was to become a judge and to reach for the highest position therein. Although the newspapers already have

---

\*Adapted from a speech given at the Appellate Division retirement dinner for the Honorable James H. Coleman, Jr.

\*\*Presiding Judge, Superior Court of New Jersey, Appellate Division.

<sup>1</sup>Presiding Judge, Superior Court of New Jersey, Appellate Division.

discussed Jim's background, some of the details may bear repetition to show Jim's continued effort in reaching law school and his dream to be on the bench. Jim grew-up in rural Lawrenceville, Virginia, where segregation was taken to an extreme. Jim's family was extremely poor; his father was a sharecropper and school bus driver, and also ran a small country store from the back of the house. Jim's mother was a homemaker of deep religious faith. Many years ago, Jim told me that he would want to retire after he met the system's requirements provided he felt there were no more challenges or positions he could reach, because he had been working to help support his family since the age of nine. One can only imagine his early memories of Virginia in the 1930's.

Both in his segregated school house and in Sunday school, Jim developed a profound love for education. Jim was recognized for his intellectual and moral prowess in high school, where he was the class salutatorian, senior class president, and president of the 4-H club. When other children wore jeans to school, Jim wore a suit and bow tie. In the words of an old friend, Jim was "all business and polish." Jim was taken under the wing of two high school teachers who held various fund raisers so that Jim could be exposed to and participate in educationally and culturally enriching programs. These wonderful teachers instilled in Jim the premise that you could live your life by reaching for a star.

Following high school, Jim came north to Newark and worked for one dollar an hour in a plastics factory to help with college expenses back at the segregated Virginia State College. At the time, Jim's role model was Dr. Ralph Bunche, a prominent African-American Nobel Laureate who also served as an Under Secretary General of the United Nations; and it was Dr. Bunch who first inspired Jim to think that he might become an attorney, rather than a farmer. Jim, however, did toy with the idea of becoming a physician but was allergic to formaldehyde. On occasion, Jim has told me that he still remembers the tied-up cardboard suitcase he carried in the summers of college and law school. Despite this adversity, Jim graduated *magna cum laude* from college and entered Howard University School of Law, where the yearbook recognized his "gentlemanly bearing." The small southern college and Howard University School of Law prepared him well for his career. They instilled and reinforced his code of conduct, personal commitment, exacting use of language, sense of calm, understanding of logic, and an appreciation for the roots of the law. The Appellate Division judges who have worked with Jim know his intellectual ability.

In 1962, Jim and Sophia were married. He and Sophia have two wonderful children, Kairon and Jimmy. One of the delights in Jim's and Sophia's lives is their granddaughter, Amber. I have told Jim that after Sophia and the rest of his family, all of his colleagues — his Appellate Division family — are the happiest and proudest over his appointment.

During our first assignments in the Appellate Division, Jim and I shared a law clerk and never had a disagreement over choosing or utilizing the clerk. Jim selected a courtroom located on the ground-floor, thereby avoiding all elevator problems but keeping Jim on criminal trials for years. Jim, as we know, is dignified, as evidenced by his speech, dress, and general demeanor. I recall a humorous incident, however, where Jim was a bit undignified. One day during a jury trial early in his bench career, Jim leaned back in his chair without realizing that the rear wheel had come off the chair. I am told that all one could see were Jim's two feet sticking over the bench! Nonetheless, Jim took the incident in stride and resumed the trial, exemplifying his good nature and character. Speaking of feet, those of us who have shared chambers with our new justice know that Jim has a special pair of chambers "thinking shoes" — that is what is left of a pair of shoes. They are scruffy, worn, torn, and to my knowledge, well over twenty years old (and probably much older than that). But Jim swears that he thinks and writes his best when wearing these shoes, and they remind him of his roots. For such a "natty" dresser as Jim, they are a sight to behold.

Jim also has managed to balance his life with continued physical activity. Particularly, Jim enjoys tennis and is an avid player. As a former intermediate level tennis player who has played with Jim, I can tell you that he has an over-powering first and a second serve that is so wickedly deceptive that I literally ran around the wrong side of it more than once. Rumor has it that various Supreme Court Justices are now brushing-up on their games.

What we are losing, and therefore, what the Supreme Court is gaining, is an immensely well-rounded, complex individual who is moderate in his views, understanding of suffering, respectful of the law, dignified, and yet has retained a wonderful sense of humor. Over the past twenty-plus years, Jim has always been a true colleague and trusted personal friend to me. I have no doubt that on the Supreme Court, Jim will remember his roots in the Appellate Division, much like he has remembered his early roots during his tenure as Presiding Judge in the Appellate Division. In closing, I still think back to the change that Jim has experienced from rural Virginia of the mid-1930's until now. But now, I see people stepping from the path of Jim Coleman and tipping their hats, recognizing a gentleman of stature, culture, and learning who deservedly holds the position of Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of New Jersey. Congratulations Jim!

