

“Lefty” Travis A Lawyer’s Life

I just heard about Ron Travis. It was a shock, a bombshell. I was sitting in my daughter’s apartment in French Hill, Jerusalem, Israel, when the e-mail came to me. I knew that Ron had a broken heart after the untimely death from breast cancer of his daughter, Leigh. Only a few days before we left to visit our daughter, Kaila, in Israel, Ron told me that there were days when he found it very difficult to go on. I worried about him but knew not what to say.

Ron Travis. He was one of the first people I knew when I came to Williamsport, introduced to me by his friend and colleague Jack Humphrey. Perhaps the first experience I had with Ron is when I was working as a law clerk for Judge Muir. I was brand new on the job and Judge Muir handed me a file saying, “You’re a liberal young lawyer from Georgetown, why don’t you draft an Opinion for me giving Ron’s client a break.” Ron Travis had represented a man convicted of voluntary sodomy in prison and acquitted of assault. Ron had raised the question as to whether a person could be punished for voluntary sexual intercourse with a person of the same sex. He was way ahead of his time. Judge Muir expressed an interest in perhaps ruling Ron’s way and vacating the conviction of voluntary deviate sexual intercourse. Other states had found that such a crime could not be punished. Well I studied the subject for Judge Muir and I advised him that while there were states that found such a conviction to be a violation of due process or equal protection, I thought that in the prison setting where coercion is all too common, the conviction should be upheld. Judge Muir was not difficult to convince but I took a little bit of teasing from Jack and the Judge who said to me, “See even a young liberal law review type can be conservative when he has to face the real world.”

The Opinion was published and lawyers interested in same sex issues talked about it for a few years. I think Ron Travis never completely forgave me for it and when we became partners in 1982, I took a little bit of heat from him.

We practiced separately for a while. Ron and Jack practiced law at the Candor Youngman firm and I was with Stuart, Murphy, Hager and Smith. When Smith went on the bench and Hager left to start the Insurance Federation, Ron and Jack came over and joined our firm. What a magnificent time those years were. We had not much money and many established clients left the new firm, but we were happy to be building a future together.

In a way I thought Jack saved Ron's butt. One day when Jack and I were both still working for Judge Muir, we were walking down the street with the Judge. We saw Ron drive by in his blue Bonneville Pontiac convertible. Remember all those yellow happy faces? Well Ron had a yellow face with a frown and next to it the bumper sticker said, "Have a shitty day." Judge Muir was appalled and upset. Jack defended Ron and explained that it was just Ron's sense of humor; his way of mocking establishment conventional thinking. The Judge came to admire Ron's ability, discernment, integrity and even humor. It did not take long for Judge Muir to gain a very high regard for Ron Travis, notwithstanding the bumper sticker.

Ron took some flak from judges and lawyers in the community for his flip-flops, shorts and unconventional dress. I must admit that even I was irritated when he hung his shorts on the iron balcony railing behind our building to dry them out. "Ron," I said with irritation in my voice, "what do you think this is a tenement in New York City?" I knew something about tenements. I was born on Second Avenue in New York City, although there were no tenements wherever I grew up. Ron just kind of looked at me with that sublime look which was equivalent to saying, "Do you think I really care what you think?" He took his shorts down anyway but never apologized for it. It is just the way he was. In more recent years he did not hang his shorts on the railing anymore but sometimes he would hang them on the door of his convertible when he put the window down, which unfortunately he parked next to my car.

When it came to management of the firm, I was always impressed by Ron's respect for Kim. When Kim began to manage the firm, the firms in Williamsport were all managed by men. There was one particular incident where the firms in Williamsport refused to have a meeting with our firm or in fact any firm because our manager was both a woman and a non-attorney. Ron was the first one to say, "Let them jump in the lake; we don't need to be part of that meeting." Ron Travis respected women and respected people without title. He knew what made a person quality and it was not necessarily where they went to school, how much money they had or what was on their resume. What made a person important, Ron understood, was how they behaved towards other people and whether they were people of high-minded, thoughtful integrity.

Only recently, in fact the last conversation I had with Ron, he expressed some discomfort with a judge who denied him his Fee Petition in a criminal case he was handling. I asked him how he was going to handle it, since clearly he had done the work and was entitled to the fee. He said that he decided to just let the judge pay him whatever he thought was fair, "You know Cliff it's just not worth arguing over money" he told me.

Ron was a rarity as a person and unique as a lawyer. He looked for no one to curry favor with and he pulled no punches. The only person I ever saw Ron kiss up to

perhaps a little bit was Malcolm Muir. I think that was more about his respect for the Judge and really had nothing to do with seeking favoritism. They were both unusual people who cut their own path in life. People like that understand one another and have everlasting regard and love.

In the weeks after Leigh Travis' death from breast cancer, Ron and I talked more than we perhaps had talked for many years previously. I was struck by Ron's sensitivity. After Leigh died we hugged and kissed one another. It was a moment I'll never forget. It was the kind of warmth and affection that most people did not realize Ron was capable of. We cried together and talked about his tragic loss. I knew that after Leigh passed away, the joy of life no longer existed for Ron and I worried about him. His death so shortly after Leigh's must have some spiritual significance that I am not fully capable of understanding.

We say in Hebrew when a great person dies, "Blessed is the Lord, the great Judge." Ron is now appearing before the ultimate Judge and I am positive he will win his case!

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