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Wendell Lee Griffen

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The gap in the road along Arkansas 26 where Judge Wendell Griffen grew up is less than two hours' drive from his office in Little Rock. In some respects, though, rural Pike County is light years away and -- at the same time -- with him every day. Griffen has sat on the state Court of Appeals since 1996, and this year he serves the Pulaski County Bar Association as president. Calm and courtly, tall and lanky, Griffen wears his hair and his beard closely cropped. Books are packed into the shelves that line the walls of his office at the Justice Building where he invites a couple of visitors to make themselves comfortable.

He loves to read and has ever since he was a child. Griffen's paternal grandmother introduced him to Reader's Digest Condensed Books when he was in grade school. In turn, the stories he absorbed in those pages introduced him to the world.

The eldest of three children, Griffen attended segregated schools until he entered 10th grade; he graduated from high school at 15. "I was, through most of my elementary and secondary years, one to two years younger than everybody else in my class. I was also smaller. And I was the bookworm."

The books his grandmother brought home to him "were my outlets to the world. I learned about other cultures, how other people lived. It didn't make any difference whether they were Westerns, histories or mysteries. For a kid growing up in Pike County, Arkansas, that was it. My best friends of childhood were books."

Under the loving, consistent instruction of his parents, Griffen developed a dedication to the two things held in high esteem in their home: education and Christianity. The influence of his upbringing may be most obvious in the fact that, in addition to his duties on the bench, he serves as pastor of Little Rock's Emmanuel Baptist Church.

Griffen's close friend and spiritual mentor is the Rev. Robert Willingham, pastor of Mount Pleasant Baptist Church. Having observed Griffen in his two vocations, Willingham says, "I strongly feel that his ministry has been complemented by his legal career, and his legal career has complemented his religious walk. I discern that if there was anything in the law that would pull him away from his religious convictions, he's not allowed that to happen."

Willingham adds that Griffen is "a man of integrity, good judgment, fairness; he has a belief in the family system and is a strong believer in justice, mercy and the ministry of healing when people are hurt. He's very reliable and dependable. And in my opinion, nonhypocritical. We can see some of the fruits of that: He is naturally sensitive to what's happening in government, and he seeks to put people above government. He sees people not as machines but as human beings who are subject to mistakes and at the same time should receive the ministry of forgiveness and redemption."

Griffen is at once well-spoken yet relaxed as he talks with his visitors. On an earlier walk down to the courtroom where he deliberates, he exhibited a pastor's gift for greeting employees and newcomers with genuine warmth and interest.

And that's the way he makes his guests feel welcome as he talks about his life path that began in the home of Josephine and the late Bennie Griffen. That home was between Antoine and Delight.

Griffen's dad worked in the timber industry for Weyerhaeuser Co. Inc., and his mother traveled to Murfreesboro to work in an Armour poultry plant. A premium was placed on faith, education and hard work -- the youngest of 11 children, Josephine Griffen had been reared by a widowed mother during the Depression. And though Bennie Griffen never got beyond the eighth grade, he went on to get a General Educational Development diploma after his eldest son graduated from college.

During his childhood, Griffen says, "Basically my life was defined by church, school, family and the 40 acres we were living on."

Like his younger siblings Sue and Danny, Griffen attended the two-room Rosenwald Elementary School; he was bused to nearby Okolona for ninth grade at Simmons High School then attended Delight High School.

"The people who introduced me to life were my father's brothers and sisters, all of whom had opportunities to go out of Arkansas and do things," he says. "I was challenged by my aunts and uncles, who examined us about grades and studies."

A combination of A's and B's on a report card drew the same comment every time, Griffen recalls. "The response from my uncles and aunts was, 'Why are there so many B's?' My father did the same thing. Every PTA meeting, the teachers knew Daddy would be there to cross-examine them. We were going to be in school, we were going to be in church. There were no ifs, ands or buts about it."

When Griffen graduated from Delight High School in 1968, he enrolled in the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville in hopes of becoming a physicist -- a choice that still puzzles him in retrospect. "I was, at best, an average math student." At that time, his school didn't offer a physics class, so Griffen took one at Henderson State College (now Henderson State University) the summer before his freshman year. He says he passed "largely due to the generosity of the professor."

COLLEGE RECKLESSNESS

Life at the university proved an exciting change for the 16-year-old Griffen. From a graduating class of about 37 students, he was one of 230 in freshman chemistry. Through ROTC, he joined the Pershing Rifles military fraternity and accompanied the group to New Orleans to march in a Mardi Gras parade. The students bunked in a naval vessel, "and my fraternity brothers dreamed up a way to sneak me into Pat O'Brien's," the infamous French Quarter bar.

Back home, Griffen says, his mother was watching footage of the Mardi Gras celebration on a Shreveport television affiliate, "and I'm sure she was wondering what had become of her son."

In short, school was a blast. A bit too much of a blast, actually. In the fall of 1969, Griffen was holding a flag in the color guard that welcomed then-President Nixon to the Arkansas-Texas gridiron showdown. Within a few weeks, at the end of his third semester, "The university graciously invited me to go home and contemplate my ways," Griffen says smiling. His academic downfall? "A combination of youthfulness, the curiosity I've always had, and a certain recklessness."

For eight months, Griffen concentrated on 12 hours of college correspondence courses "and thought seriously about why I flunked out and how I could do better." He wanted hay to make money "and learned a lot about growing up. I learned that I didn't want to live in Pike County if I did not have an education -- in fact, I didn't want to live anywhere if I didn't have an education."

And while he contemplated his life, Griffen says, his parents quietly watched and waited. "My father never said an unkind word about my failure on the drive home from Fayetteville or during the eight months I was home," says Griffen. The one time his dad broached the subject was when Griffen had to have tuition to return to school. "I asked Daddy for the money, and I knew he had to go to the bank and borrow it. All he said was, 'Son, are you going to stick with it this time?' I said, 'Yes, sir.' And he said, 'You can have the money.' That's the only thing he said about it. They were willing to give me a second chance, but they expected me to learn. My home was a safe place to be, even when I made mistakes."

NEW DIRECTIONS

Griffen returned to Fayetteville on academic probation in the fall of 1970. At the end of his third semester, he'd made the dean's list. "In the process I decided I wanted to be a lawyer, because lawyers were the people making change happen at the time" while debates were raging nationally over civil rights and Vietnam. "I still think lawyers are fascinating people. We have extraordinary opportunities to influence in positive ways the way people live and build their lives. There's no aspect of life the law doesn't affect."

Since participation in advanced ROTC helped Griffen pay for school, he was commissioned to spend three years in the Army after graduation in 1973. He traveled first to Fort Benning, Ga., where those Reader's Digest stories he loved in his childhood resurfaced -- his fascination with the story of a World War II paratrooper created an interest in jump school. "I had a fear of heights, and I wanted to see if I could handle it," he says.

Having skipped supper the night before and breakfast the morning of his trial run, Griffen passed out in line in the 90-degree Georgia heat. When the instructors revived him, "I said, 'I'll make a deal with you. Let me have a straw of grass to chew on, and put me back in the line. If I fall out of the run, kick me out.'" His tenacity prevailed, and Griffen made the run. He completed jump school in about three weeks. "I loved it. But when I look back on it, I wanted to show myself that I would not back down -- not to prove it to anyone else."

He was assigned to an infantry unit after graduation and finished his term at Fort Carson, Colo., first as an artillery officer, then as race relations officer. In December 1974, he married Patricia Greene, who he'd known since high school. The two met during an education conference at the church in Malvern her family attended. They became pen pals. "Over time, we developed an attraction to each other," Griffen says. "She's a very smart, attractive, focused woman. She always has been, even as a teen-ager. She's very organized. And over the years, I began to appreciate more those aspects of her personality."

A magna cum laude graduate of Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Patricia Griffen had just completed a master's degree in psychology at UA when the couple married. They returned to Fayetteville in July 1976, where she received a doctorate in psychology and he received a juris doctorate from the UA School of Law.

Griffen joined the Little Rock firm of Wright, Lindsey & Jennings in 1979, while his wife joined the staff of the Little Rock State Hospital as a clinical psychologist. She entered private practice 15 years ago before the births of their sons -- Martyn, 13, and Elliott, 11.

Wendell Griffen took a leave from the firm for a couple of years when Gov. Bill Clinton appointed him to chair the Worker's Compensation Commission in April 1985. He returned to his legal practice in February 1987 for nine years, until he got a call from Gov. Jim Guy Tucker. Griffen was about to be appointed to the Court of Appeals, effective Jan. 1, 1996.

From the time he studied political science as an undergraduate at Fayetteville, Griffen says, "I always wanted to be a judge. And I knew I wanted to be an appeals court judge. So it was a dream come true."

Three judges at a time confer on cases and hand down decisions. They rotate every month, so each member of the 12-member court works on a panel with every other member at least once during the year.

Griffen's love of reading suits him well on the bench, even as he works through the stacks of briefs he reads for court. These briefs are "introductions to other people's lives and trials. It's like I get a new set of mysteries, tragedies, dramas and thrillers every week. They're almost never comedies, but always there's something light and inspired in them."

And always there's something to read -- whether it deals with the law, with parenting, or his ministry.

LICENSED TO PREACH

Griffen became a Christian when he was 8. He says there were always religious influences in his life, but "I didn't think about being a minister. In college I gave it some thought, but I didn't think God was that desperate. Then I almost left law school after the first year to go to seminary."

Eventually Griffen decided that God "would be satisfied if I was the best Sunday school teacher I can be. But I realized one can't make a deal with God."

Willingham, the Griffens' pastor, "encouraged and affirmed me, and helped me do some off-site seminary study. I affectionately call him my 'Obi-Wan Kenobi'" after the Star Wars Jedi knight who instructed a young Luke Skywalker.

Griffen was licensed to preach in 1983 by Mount Pleasant, and entered the pulpit at Emmanuel on May 29, 1988.

A great challenge of serving in a bivocational ministry is finding the right amounts of time and energy to give to his roles. "I am blessed that my wife is very understanding, and has been supportive of my work in ministry," Griffen says. "But it's still challenging."

He adds, "My big vice is over-commitment. So it has been tough for me to know how much to take on, or to say no to."

Griffen serves on the board of his sons' school, Pulaski Academy. At the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, he's on the Foundation Fund and Pastoral Care boards. He's involved with the Central City Coalition of Congregations and takes an active interest in following his sons' Scout troop.

Whatever the demands on his time, Griffen's love of his work makes it worth them.

"Being asked to do what you always wanted to do, it's like being on the street -- in a pick-up ball game -- with players who are at the top of their game and love playing, and they let you play with them," he says. "When Judge Bill Wilson talks about his job, he says it's like being paid to eat ice cream. And that's exactly how I feel."

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