

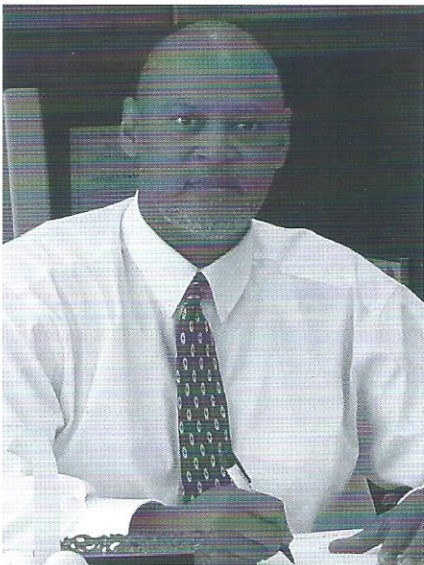


# U.S. ATTORNEY TONY JENKINS

## — FROM OCILLA, GA., TO THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

BY ROBAN JOHNSON

**W**hen Mercer alumnus Tony Jenkins, JD '85, speaks of his childhood, he describes it as the most frightening time of his life.



*Tony Jenkins*  
U.S. Attorney

It was a time when bloody images of the Vietnam War dominated television and when racial inequality was at the forefront of the American landscape. Today, all of that is behind him, except for the lingering scars of growing up black in a white America. When you see him today, you see a successful attorney who has moved up the ranks to become the U.S. Attorney for the Virgin Islands — an accomplishment he says was not unfathomable, but one that would seem miles away from his boyhood years in Ocilla.

“My blessing was also my curse,” he said of his younger years as a STAR student and first African American at the Ocilla High and Industrial School. “Even as a young child, my teachers told me I was smart and that I would go great places, but it was a roller coaster ride. It was a frightening time for me and for other young people.”

On the last day of high school, Jenkins remembers cleaning out his locker and then running home as fast as he could. “I cried half the way,” he said. “I was afraid. I didn’t know what I was going to do in my life, but I knew I had to do something.”

Those feelings, he says, were not uncommon among his peers. “We had very few role models,” he says. “I had always been told I was smart and that I could achieve great things, but I saw few successful black men in South Georgia.” One role model was circuit preacher, the Rev. C. J. Scrubbs. “He became a mentor to me and to some of the other young boys in the church,” says Jenkins. “Rev. Scrubbs was involved in the Civil Rights Movement to a large degree. As was custom in those days, the black churches would go to the venues of the Civil Rights marches and participate.”

Rev. Scrubbs invited Jenkins and some other students to take part in the Albany march. Although the sheriff met them at the Flint River Bridge, arrested Dr. Martin Luther King, and turned the others around, he said a seed was planted. “I began listening to some of his sermons on the radio and those of other ministers. It seemed clear that we needed to look for the court system to help us gain some of the rights we were striving for.”

At the same time, he became familiar with Albany civil rights attorney, C. B. King. “C. B. King was a hero in those days for the African American

community. Although I didn't know I wanted to be a lawyer, I knew I wanted to be like him."

With the encouragement of his high school teachers, Jenkins enrolled at Albany State University under a football scholarship. He did well and had the highest GPA of the freshman class that year. Still uncertain about his future, he decided to enter the military. He was named Soldier of the Year while stationed with the 1st Army Division in Germany, and was later awarded the prestigious Army Commendation Medal.

Although he enjoyed a successful military career, Jenkins says the time came when he realized with clarity what course in life he wanted to take. "The seeds had been planted during my childhood," he said. "I decided that one of the things I wanted to do with my life was to give back to society. I thought the law would be an avenue to do that."

Jenkins completed his undergraduate requirements during his stint in the military, earning his degree through Troy University at Fort Benning. Mercer University's Walter F. George School of Law was his first choice for law school.

"I was blessed," he said. "I don't think I would have received the quality of legal education I received at Mercer anywhere else."

Mercer provided Jenkins with a nurturing and motivating environment. "Most of the professors had a connection with the military, and several professors, including Jim Marshall and Hal Lewis, took an interest in me." He recalls Professor Lewis patiently answering all of his questions after civil procedure classes and giving him the encouragement he needed to forge ahead as a law student. Professor Edgar H. Wilson also took a personal interest in him and would often engage him in conversation if only for a minute or two. "It's been that way throughout my life," he adds. "My life isn't based on my own personal accomplishments. It is based on the assistance and help I've received from others."

After graduating from Mercer, Jenkins received offers from firms in the Atlanta area but had decided to become a prosecutor even though the pay was about the same as he had earned in the military. "With a wife and three children, it was tempting to join a practice, but I decided to continue with my plans," he said. He sat for the Florida bar once and scored in the top 10 percent.

During his first year in Florida's 4th Judicial

Circuit, Jenkins' career as a state prosecutor blossomed. He went from misdemeanor prosecutor to chief prosecutor within four years. Shortly after, he was named deputy director in the state attorney's office. "My career was going great. The judges I met cared for me and nurtured me as a lawyer. I knew I had made the right decision. It was almost as if I could do no wrong," he added. "I got my share of not-guilty verdicts, but still my career took off."

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When the state attorney decided to run for mayor, Jenkins decided it was time to consider the federal system and joined the Northern District of Florida. "That's the part of my career where I felt myself going nowhere. I had been on the A-train, then found myself traveling by horse and buggy."

After 11-12 years as a Florida prosecutor, Jenkins accepted a position in the Virgin Islands. "All of a sudden, my career took off again," he said. "I transferred to the Virgin Islands in 2000 and became Managing Attorney in 2001. In 2002 or 2003, I became Chief of the criminal division where I supervised all of the investigation and prosecution cases filed in the District of the Virgin Islands." Soon after, he became the First Assistant U.S. Attorney. "I became the chief financial officer, so to speak," he said, "which means I ran the district." The district, administration, civil, criminal and personnel, were all under his command.

Jenkins said when he arrived in the Virgin Islands he met people who cared for him as a prosecutor and as a human being. "These people assisted me in getting my career back on track." When the U.S. Attorney retired in August 2004, Jenkins became the acting U.S. Attorney.

With presidential elections on the horizon, Jenkins had to wait until President Bush was re-

elected before he could be named U.S. Attorney. He had interviewed with both Attorney General Ashcroft and newly-appointed Attorney General Gonzales, before he heard the news. "My wife called me at work one day and said the Senate had just confirmed my appointment," he said. "She had seen it on CSPAN. It was really an exciting time for me."

From the time he arrived in the Virgin Islands, he says he has felt at home. "For whatever reason, God has yet to reveal to me, these people embraced me as one of their own, even though the culture is completely different than my southern upbringing." If there is a downside, he says, it is that public corruption is deep-rooted like it is in any community. "Having to deal with that as the chief federal law enforcement officer is difficult."

He is also amazed by the disparity between classes. "There is no middle class here," he said. "You are either extremely wealthy or living in abject poverty." And some things, he says, never change. "Crime is comparable to any other place I've lived, although the dynamics are different." He also said another commonality is distrust of police officers. "If I lived in an African American community in the states, the majority of officers would be white, and most African American communities are distrustful of police officers. The police department here is almost 98 percent black and the administration is 100 percent black, but the community is just as skeptical and distrustful as they are anywhere. The dynamics are different, but real root problems are the same."

Considering all he has accomplished in his life, Jenkins looks inward when asked about the biggest challenges he has faced. "I've always been my own worst enemy," he says. "There was a point in my life when I had a lot of bitterness from my childhood. It's amazing because my life is a product of good people, both black and white, who showed an interest in me and helped me along the way. But I was raised in a society where you were taught to hate yourself. I had a lot of anger and at times would lash out at people thinking they were racist. I would see racism at every corner. That was the biggest thing I had to overcome."

At 52, he says he has done well, and has been blessed. "I believe that no other law school could have and would have prepared me for my legal career as did Mercer. I have very fond memories of my time there." ■