

Judicial Profile

G. CLINTON HEYWORTH

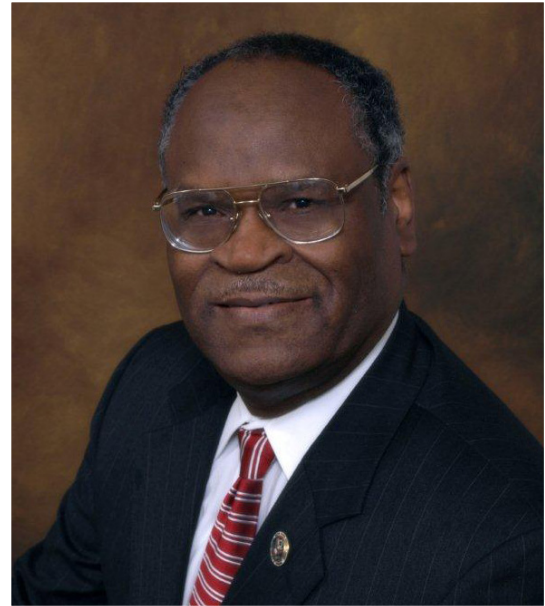
Hon. Curtis Collier Chief Judge, U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee

WHETHER AS AN attorney with the Judge Advocate General's Corps in the U.S. Air Force, as an assistant U.S. attorney, or as a federal judge, Chief Judge Curtis Collier has practiced law by applying hard work, civility, and effectiveness for 36 years.

For him, these principles are not just superficial methods of legal work. He considers hard work, civility, and effectiveness to be at the essence of his profession. "Lawyers serve society by providing a way to manage conflicts," he says. "When lawyers become aggressive and threatening or the process becomes too slow to properly manage conflicts, society will look for other ways to resolve the conflicts that naturally flow between people who live, work, or do business with each other." And, so, lawyers who appear before him as well as lawyers who work for him are expected to work hard, show civility, and be efficient.

Born in rural Arkansas in 1949, Judge Collier learned to value the opportunities that come with hard work at a young age. His parents did not have a lot of money and, when he was old enough, he picked cotton to help support his family. He endured hot summers and not only learned the value of hard work but also began to believe that, in America, hard work could lead you places. That was good, because, in his own words, "I hated picking cotton. I hated it intently. And I knew that was not for me." So he worked hard in high school, and, in the summer of 1966, after his junior year in high school, the National Science Foundation placed him in a summer science program at Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, Miss.

Judge Collier's work ethic put him at the center of American history that summer. Civil rights activist James Meredith began a historic "March Against Fear" that year, and when a bitter racist shot James Meredith, civil rights leaders and students—including Judge Collier—rallied to show solidarity and finished what James Meredith had begun. For the first time—but not the last—Judge Collier's hard work put him in the right place at the right time. He marched from Tougaloo College to the state capitol in Jackson, Miss. It was perhaps then that he learned that civility does not mean you don't fight hard. "I think it is very tempting when something happens to rant and rave and be belligerent to someone,"



says Judge Collier. He put it another way for his kids: "Don't burn bridges because you can never have too many friends and too few enemies." He still practices law the way he marched in 1966—with civility.

During the summer between his junior and senior year at Tennessee State University, Judge Collier began working in a summer program as a scientist at the Procter & Gamble Company. After Vanderbilt, Duke, and Yale accepted him into their law schools, he chose Duke University. The Air Force ROTC financed Judge Collier's undergraduate education, and so he went into the Air Force after law school, still "not sure that this law thing was right for me," he says. His first trial would seal that decision.

Beginning in Warner Robbins, Ga., and ultimately in the Philippines, the Air Force gave Judge Collier a chance to try cases. He worked hard at each case and learned that "you need to really understand a case to try it well." While stationed in the Philippines, he also saw firsthand the cruelties of slow justice. "Many of the civil cases in the Philippines could last upwards of 10 years or more," he says. This experience developed Judge Collier's appreciation for the value of an efficient legal system.

Living in the Philippines, he also saw that the United States offered its citizens many opportunities as a result of hard work. "I'm not sure that someone

who came from my background would have achieved what I've achieved in any other country," he says. He also came to firmly believe the U.S. legal system is unrivaled in the world.

Judge Collier kept working hard and successfully defended a young enlisted woman during a fraudulent enlistment case, after which both the judge who tried the case and Judge Collier's boss—who served as the prosecutor in that case—gave Judge Collier rave reviews. Before leaving the Air Force, he earned the Meritorious Service Medal, four Air Force Commendation Medals, and the Small Arms Marksman Ribbon.

Judge Collier left the Air Force in 1979 and accepted a position as an assistant U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Louisiana, and, in 1987, he accepted a position as an assistant U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Tennessee. During his service as an AUSA in Tennessee, Judge Collier earned the Department of Justice's Special Commendation in 1991; the Service to Mankind Award in 1993; and the FBI and Department of Justice's Letters of Commendation in 1989, 1993, and 1994. In 1995, he earned both the Phi Kappa Phi Award and the Distinguished Alumni Award from Tennessee State University.

In 1995, Judge Collier's guiding principles of hard work, civility, and efficiency in administering justice led President Clinton to appoint him to the federal bench. Beginning in 2005, when Judge Collier was named the chief judge for the Eastern District of Tennessee, he began managing that federal district using the same guiding principles.

With all of this, when you ask Judge Collier what he considers his biggest contribution to the law, he re-

sponds with three words: "my law clerks." He chooses them directly out of law school, and they serve for no longer than two years. He wants to give as many lawyers as he can the opportunity to see the system "up close and personal."

Judge Collier has directly influenced more than 40 attorneys who served as his clerks. They consistently cite his intelligence, hard work, and his demand that they participate in the process. After a trial, Judge Collier can often be found questioning his clerks about what they thought of the lawyers, the witnesses, and even his rulings. As ongoing testimony to his impact on their lives, his former clerks continue to call him after finishing their clerkships and visit him if they find themselves nearby. In the words of one law clerk, Judge Collier is "the embodiment of the ideal lawyer as an engaged and uplifting member of the broader community."

Hard working, civil, and effective, Judge Collier still gets to work before most of his clerks do and often stays after they leave. He still approaches each case with the forethought and diligence that gives plaintiffs, defendants, and lawyers the sense that they have found justice in his courtroom. Our legal system is better because of Chief Judge Collier and the many other lawyers and judges like him who still believe law to be a noble profession of service to our fellow citizens. **TFL**

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