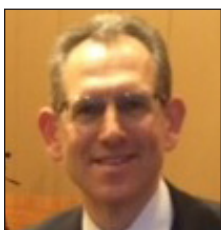




The 4-H Judge: Humble, Hard-Working, Honest, And Helpful: Hon. Harlin DeWayne “Cooter” Hale

by Alan S. Trust



Alan S. Trust is a U.S. bankruptcy judge for the Eastern District of New York. He appreciates the assistance of Rob Coldwell, currently the chief deputy clerk for the Northern District of Texas Bankruptcy Court and publicly dubbed the “world’s greatest law clerk” by Judge Hale. Dallas Bar Association Newsletter, <http://bit.ly/1PVqzRk>. Disclaimer: None of the statements contained in this paper constitutes official policy of any judge, court, agency, government official, or quasi-governmental agency.

I guess that’s really seven H’s, but who’s counting? I have the pleasure of sharing with you some insights and publicly available information about one of the truly great guys, a man I have had the pleasure of being friends with for 30 years and who has twice been a colleague (nine years in private practice and seven-plus years on the bench). But first a disclaimer: I have abandoned my objectivity for this piece.

Here’s what y’all probably know. Judge Harlin DeWayne “Cooter” Hale is from humble roots. Born in Natchez, Mississippi, he grew up in the small town of St. Joseph, Louisiana. His father was a cotton farmer and worked the family land. As a child, Judge Hale learned the value of hard work, rising early in the morning and working until the work got done. He also learned the importance of honesty, growing up in a time and a place where a person’s word was his bond. Those small-town roots also instilled in him a desire to help others, a flame which still burns bright in one of our nation’s best bankruptcy judges.

Some more of the historical background. Judge Hale was valedictorian of his high-school graduating class at Tensas Academy in St. Joseph, LA, and was the starting point guard on the Tensas basketball team. He next attended Louisiana State University, where he worked his way through school. He was an active member of his fraternity, Sigma Nu. As a college junior, a friend piqued his interest in attending law school. After setting his mind to that career path, he was accepted to LSU Law School. Not surprisingly, he did very well in law school and was able to land a highly sought-after clerkship with then-Louisiana Supreme Court Justice James L. Dennis (now on the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals). Judge Hale’s willingness to work hard helped him immensely, as Judge Dennis was also a hard worker.

Following his clerkship, he moved to the big city of Dallas, where he began private practice with the Strasburger & Price law firm. Strasburger had a long and proud tradition of being considered a genteel place to



work, where the lawyers truly believed in the time-honored tradition of law as a noble profession. Judge Hale’s four H’s—humble, hard-working, honest, and helpful—served him well, and his career began to take off.

In 1981, he met Claire King of Commerce, Texas. After a courtship, they were married in 1983—or as Judge Hale would say, it took her that long to agree. Claire worked in a variety of fields, including public relations, and for many years helped organize the Neiman Marcus Christmas parade in Dallas. Nowadays, after her recovery from a foot injury, Claire works as a teacher in the Dallas arts magnet high school, a highly regarded part of the Dallas public school system.

The Hales have raised two fine young men, and you will not meet prouder parents. Both sons graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School, a public high school. Their older son, George, attended George Washington University and graduated with an international affairs degree and a Semitic languages minor. For several years, George has been working as a journalist in war-ravaged areas of the Middle East. Their younger son, John Ben, followed in some of his dad’s footsteps

by attending LSU, but he took many more steps there as a four-year member of the Tiger marching band. After graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree, he followed his dad into serving the public by enlisting in the Air Force. John Ben has been deployed to Afghanistan, Korea, and Germany and is now a captain working in Air Force security forces.

And now, for what I think about his Honor. We met in 1985, when our law firms were working on the bankruptcy case of Clint Murchison Jr. (founder and first owner of the Dallas Cowboys), one of the largest personal bankruptcy cases ever filed, and certainly a huge case for 1985. Sometime during that case, someone had the bright idea that a bunch of young renegades could start their own law firm. We were all associates, none with more than six years of experience and no stable of clients. Fortunately, we had no idea how little we knew about what it took to run a law firm and, even better, found a bank that was willing to lend us money against, well, our smiles and desire to be successful. It did not take very long before Judge Hale helped turn our law firm into a referral magnet, and several firms in town started to send us work. For nine years I had the privilege of being his law partner, handling cases, counseling clients, and growing a business, while striving to strike a work-life balance, as we were also starting and raising families. We still smile as we look back on those stress-filled, fun-filled days as some of the best of times.

Judge Hale is very devoted to his faith. Not only is he a regular attendee at services and a student of the Bible, he has been a member of his church's elder board for the past 10 years and a Sunday school teacher for 25 years.

Judge Hale continues to hone his craft as a truly remarkable jurist and educator. He never seeks the limelight, but he does not shrink from the big case, the big stage. When he was presiding over the multinational, multibillion-dollar, mega *Vitro* case, the parties at times essentially told him that his decisions would not only significantly affect United States-Mexico business and political relations, but could upset the world financial

markets as well. He kept his cool and did his job; the Fifth Circuit seemed to think he handled that case just fine.²

He is as concerned about a struggling consumer debtor's ability to keep her car as he is about several thousand people losing their jobs if their company does not survive Chapter 11. He is a frequent CLE writer, speaker, and organizer (overcommitted, some would say), with a particular interest in the development of young lawyers. I've done many programs with his Honor, and he is about as good as they come at delivering content to lawyers and other professionals, whether new or seasoned, U.S. or international. He is a beloved adjunct professor of law at Southern Methodist University Law School in Dallas, where I have had the chance to observe his skills at "learnin' young'uns" the law.

Each day as he nestles into his chair behind his bench at the Earle Cabell Federal Building in Dallas, bow tie adorning his robe, he is a long way from St. Joseph, but only in miles. He is the same man he was working on his daddy's cotton farm. He's older, he's wiser, and he's seen and done an incredible amount. But he remains humble, hard-working, honest, and helpful. ☺

Endnotes

¹ With acknowledgement to the 4-H organization, for whom the four Hs stand for head, heart, hands, and health—"the four values members work on through fun and engaging programs." www.4-h.org/about.

² *In re Vitro S.A.B. de CV*, 701 F.3d 1031 (5th Cir. 2012).



Get Published in *The Federal Lawyer*

The Federal Lawyer strives for diverse coverage of the federal legal profession, and your contribution is encouraged to maintain this diversity. Writer's guidelines are available online at www.fedbar.org/TFLwritersguidelines.

Contact Managing Editor Sarah Perlman at tfl@fedbar.org or (571) 481-9102 with topic suggestions or questions.