

# *Fordham Urban Law Journal*

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*Volume 34, Number 3*

2006

*Article 12*

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## A Tribute to Hon. George Bundy Smith – Excellence

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## Abstract

A tribute to George Bundy Smith, focusing on his commitment to excellence as a teacher, mentor, and professional.

**KEYWORDS:** judge, judges, george bundy smith, new york state court, tribute

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\*Sandra Jefferson Grannum was appointed the Chief of the Legal Recruitment Bureau in the New York State Office of the Attorney General (“OAG”) in February 2007. From then until May 2007, Ms. Grannum also served as the Acting Bureau Chief of the OAG’s Health Care Bureau, which she joined in 2002 as the deputy. Ms. Grannum had the privilege of serving as the first senior law clerk for the Honorable George Bundy Smith, Associate Judge, New York State Court of Appeals, and as his law secretary at the Appellate Division, First Department. Ms. Grannum’s professional career covers a wide spectrum of experiences including service as an Assistant Corporation Counsel in New York City and Washington, D.C., a litigation associate at Stroock & Stroock & Lavan and in-house counsel at Avanti Corporate Health Systems. She is a member of the First Department Character Committee and was an appointee of Chief Judge Judith Kaye to the Governor’s Second Department Judicial Screening Committee. Ms. Grannum is a graduate of Georgetown University Law Center and the Johns Hopkins University. She is married to Colvin W. Grannum, Esq., President and CEO of the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, and they have one son.

**A TRIBUTE TO  
HON. GEORGE BUNDY SMITH  
EXCELLENCE**

*Sandra Jefferson Grannum\**

Good evening Dean Treanor, Judge Smith, Dr. Alene Smith, Chief Judge Kaye, distinguished members of the judiciary and the bar, friends and colleagues, ladies and gentlemen. I want to thank the co-sponsors of this event—Fordham Law School, the Judicial Friends, and the Metropolitan Black Bar Association—for giving us this opportunity to show our respect, love, and appreciation for the Honorable George Bundy Smith. It is truly a great honor for me to stand before you on this wonderful occasion to give tribute to Judge Smith, a man that I hold in the highest regard professionally and that I cherish as a mentor and friend.

It is written in Matthew 23:12 that, “[w]hoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”<sup>1</sup> We come here tonight to honor Judge Smith, a man who despite his rise from a segregated Washington, D.C., despite being educated at the finest institutions—including Phillips Academy, Yale University, and Yale Law School—despite his phenomenal rise through this state’s judiciary, despite his many publications, and despite all of his awards and accomplishments, remains a humble man of God. When the Judge calls you, he simply identifies himself as “George

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1. SAINT JAMES NEW AMERICAN BIBLE 1156 (Catholic Book Publishing Co. 1986).

Smith.” No pretensions, no demand for recognition, just “George Smith.” I am indeed delighted to be one of the voices exalting the attributes of this humble man and great jurist.

I had the privilege of serving as Judge Smith’s last law secretary on the Supreme Court of the State of New York, Appellate Division, First Department (“Appellate Division”), and his first senior law clerk at the New York Court of Appeals (“Court of Appeals”). The two and a half years that I spent with Judge Smith were marvelously challenging, professionally gratifying, and certainly life changing.

Let me tell you how I came to know Judge Smith. At the time, I was an Assistant Corporation Counsel for the District of Columbia and the Corporation Counsel was Inez Smith Reid. This was an outstanding experience for me because I had the opportunity to work directly with Mrs. Reid, who is now a judge on the District of Columbia Court of Appeals. When I told Mrs. Reid that I was moving to New York, she suggested that I contact her twin brother, Judge George Bundy Smith. Of course, I foolishly did no such thing. But, as fate would have it, one year after my arrival in New York, my first trial for the New York City Corporation Counsel was before Judge Smith. It was a multi-defendant auto accident case and I was defending the city. It was a great experience. I had the opportunity to appear before the Judge in an ultimately winning effort—the city was dismissed after plaintiff’s case. Judge Smith had absolute control of the trial at all times and he was keenly aware of everything that was said—often reminding counsel that they need not repeat themselves because he had heard them the first time.

I felt very fortunate to have appeared before Judge Smith, because the connection was now made. After the trial, I contacted him and he generously gave of his time to advise me on my transition to New York practice. And, while I might like to think that his generosity had something to do with me, it was really just Judge Smith being Judge Smith—ever ready to meet with and mentor any law student, attorney, or judge who sought his counsel.

Soon thereafter, Judge Smith was elevated to the Appellate Division. In January 1991, I was honored to become his law secretary. When Judge Smith was elevated to the Court of Appeals in September 1992, I had the privilege of working in that court. I left that clerkship and became a litigation associate at Stroock & Stroock & Lavan, a significant and gratifying career opportunity that I would not have had but for my time with Judge Smith.

So, what was it like to clerk for Judge Smith? In a word, inspirational. Judge Smith is truly a man who leads by example. He inspired, and continues to inspire, me and all those around him to work hard, to do our very best—to be excellent. I believe that Judge Smith would agree with Oprah Winfrey that, “excellence is the best deterrent to racism and sexism.”<sup>2</sup> Excellence is the mantra of Judge Smith’s life.

Judge Smith is a legal scholar; his keen intellect and quiet, but fiercely passionate, love of the law and justice are evident in his writings. Judicial excellence.

A large part of that striving for excellence, especially for lawyers and judges, is always to be prepared. Judge Smith is always prepared. You have probably heard the stories about Judge Smith carrying his briefcase full of work on the subway, to family and social gatherings, wherever, so that if there is even a moment to get some work done, he would be able to do so. To this day, I never go to court or an appointment without something to work on because of his example. Professional excellence.

Judge Smith always wanted his chambers to set the example of producing an excellent work product in a timely manner. The volume of work at the Court of Appeals and the Appellate Division is tremendous and there were always deadlines to meet. Judge Smith, however, would not hesitate to take the time to discuss a point of law or grammar—constantly teaching and, yet, allowing you to form your own opinions. Judge Smith never belittled your views, even if his were diametrically opposed. The Judge would listen patiently and then, of course, proceed to decide an issue as he thought best. Teaching excellence.

The Judge has always been patient but unwavering in his expectations and belief that his clerks were up to the task. Because of this, although the clerks worked in a pressure-filled environment, we knew that Judge Smith had confidence in our ability to get the job done. This kind of support means everything to a law clerk. If we are to be good mentors and teachers of young lawyers, we must follow Judge Smith’s example and work to not only educate them but also to build their confidence. Mentoring excellence.

Another way in which Judge Smith leads by example is how he keeps his commitments. When he was elevated to the Court of Appeals, I thought that his teaching days at Fordham were over because of the travel issue—back and forth from Albany to New

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2. EXCELLENCE (Quote/Unquote) 20 (Applewood Books 2002).

York City. But Judge Smith did not forsake his students, often driving to or from Albany at very late hours or in bad weather conditions to get to or from class.

An even earlier example of Judge Smith keeping his commitments is from his days at Yale Law School. The Judge left school to participate in the Civil Rights Movement freedom bus rides to the heart of Dixie. But, being George Bundy Smith, he did not forsake his studies, taking his books with him and continuing to study even while his bus was being showered with rocks by a mob. When asked how he could study in the midst of that situation, the Judge replied, “sticks and stones can break my bones, but law exams can kill me.”<sup>3</sup> Committed excellence.

Judge Smith also sets the example of being actively involved in the Judicial Friends, the Metropolitan Black Bar Association, and his church, despite all of his other obligations. And, he still has time to write legal articles, devote time to his family, and play tennis. But, you will never hear of these contributions and accomplishments from Judge Smith. Quiet excellence.

Finally, Judge Smith is a very caring and fun loving person. I will never forget him telling me to “go home” one evening because it was after 6 P.M. and my four year old son “needed to see his mother.” I also recall him saying, with that wonderful smile and sparkle in his eyes, that “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., would not approve of our taking a day off from work [work being the operative term], just to celebrate his birthday.” And, did I say fun loving? The Judge loves a good joke and you should see him and his wife, Alene, on the dance floor—Fred and Ginger, watch out! Now, how many judges would let their clerks say such things about them in public? Judge Smith is very cool. That’s just excellent!

In closing, Judge, I want to thank you for being this wonderful, salt of the earth example of excellence for all of us. I have been professionally and personally enriched by having you in my life and I will forever be indebted to you. You are truly a man of excellence, worthy to be exalted.

Thank you.

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3. Inez Smith Reid, *From Birth to the Bench: A Quiet but Persuasive Leader*, 68 ALB. L. REV. 215, 218-19 (2005).