

# A Celebration of Life and Commitment to Diversity

January 17, 2013

A tribute to Wm. Reece Smith, Jr. by Warren Hope Dawson, Esq.

## **The Remarks of Warren Hope Dawson, Esquire On the Occasion of the Memorial Service for William Reece Smith, Jr., Esquire January 17, 2013**

Good afternoon: I am highly honored to have this opportunity to share a few words, from my perspective, on the life and contributions of William Reece Smith Jr.: the consummate lawyer, the solid scholar, the productive citizen, the community leader, the president of every bar association that he cared to lead, and the loyal and the good friend of the poor. Now some may ask who the poor are. Well, the reference includes, among others, the oppressed, the disenfranchised, the unrepresented, the unpopular, the down-and-out, the left-out, the put-out, the tolerated, and quite often the elderly and minorities; and far too often it disproportionately includes blacks and Hispanics – just to name a few. Though Reece had innumerable awards here on earth, I am comfortable with the notion that there may be a special heavenly award for a man who did so much, for so many, for so long, for so little in return. In this regard I am reminded of Matthew 25:40 (and I paraphrase): “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” I am led to believe that I was asked to make these remarks because from a slightly different vantage point I came to see and know things about this great man that others of you may not know. Yes, it is true that Reece and I were kind of like country-cousins. He from Plant City and I from Mulberry. (Yes, both of those communities are in Florida). Maybe the proximity of those two towns had something to do with the bond that developed between us. Now being from Mulberry, I came to know a lot about Plant City, and its environs. I would occasionally skip days in junior and senior high school and go to the Plant City area and work in truck-farming: picking strawberries, harvesting watermelons, picking peas, beans, and tomatoes. Back then I would ride thru Plant City on the back of the bus en route to Tampa – I was a happy camper and I came to know about the Plant City Moody Drugstore and the Hooker’s Department Store. Actually, it was what I came to know about some white men in Mulberry and Plant City of that era that surprised me as I came to know Reece. It was simply

difficult for me to connect his progressive view of people to his very conservative beginnings. Now, it was in the year of 1966 when I first came to know this man William Reece Smith, Jr. I had only recently arrived in Tampa – fresh out of law school – and newly hired as a clerk/attorney with the National Labor Relations Board (the NLRB) , with offices in the Timberlake Federal Building, 500 Zack Street, in downtown Tampa. I believe it was Paul Sadd, a labor lawyer with Carlton Fields, that introduced us. Well, would you believe that less than a year later, in 1967, it was Reece – as the city attorney for the City of Tampa – that concurred in the decision of the then-mayor, Dick Greco, to hire me on as an assistant city attorney. That decision in the year of 1967 made me the first African American lawyer to serve as an assistant city attorney anywhere in the southern United States. In that capacity I worked with Reece for nearly five years. During that time, I was thoroughly impressed by his brilliant mind, his ethical conduct, and his commitment to address the legal needs of all the people. Not just the corporate clients, but all the people. Among other things, Reece influenced me to become active in the organized bar and as you know he went on to become the president of the American Bar Association – and in case you didn't know, I became president of the National Bar Association (if you desire, get with me later and I will explain to you the difference between those two associations). Although it had absolutely nothing to do with politics, and everything to do with protecting the legal rights of those among us who needed and could not afford lawyers – it was William Reece Smith, Jr. who was one of the primary defenders of the poor and who preserved the support of the federal government for the legal service programs throughout the nation. Again, it had nothing to do with politics, but Governor Ronald Reagan of California had been given such a fit by legal services programs in that state that by the time he was elected and came to Washington as president, there are those who suggest that about the only thing on his agenda when he arrived in Washington was to eliminate legal services for the poor. That's when Reece got busy. Poor people around this nation had and still have good reasons to sing a song that could be entitled "Oh What a Friend We Have in Reece Smith." On the matter of diversity within the legal profession, Reece accomplished a major feat without realizing the breadth of his historic decision. I say that because I am not exactly sure that Reece knew, as I did, that there was not a single black lawyer employed by a so called majority-white-law firm in but about 15 states in this nation. In the year of 1972 or 1974 , Reece and the Carlton Fields law firm hired a black lawyer, Eurich Z. Griffin, then a recent graduate of the Harvard Law School, as an associate. At the time you could have traveled up the U.S. East Coast from Florida all the way to Washington, D.C.; or you could have traveled from Florida going due north to the state of Missouri; or you could have traveled from Florida going west until you reached California, before you would find a black lawyer employed by a predominantly white law firm. **Warren vs. The City of Tampa/Hillsborough County** While Reece mentored me well and probably had more influence than anyone on my now 45- year legal career – there did come a time, though unplanned, when we were adversaries on opposite sides of a hot local voting rights issue in a case called *Warren* (no relation to me) *vs. The City of Tampa, et.al.*, involving the then-at large election of the members of the Tampa City Council and the members of the Hillsborough County Commission. On a pro-bono arrangement, and much to Reece's chagrin, I intervened in the federal law suit seeking to convert

those elections to single member districts. On the other side, Reece had been hired by the city and the county. As the case proceeded, there came a point in time (specifically 1984) when Reece and his entourage of county attorneys and at least two television crews, decided one morning to fly to Washington, D.C., to meet with staff attorneys of the Department of Justice. They were seeking a reversal of a prior Justice Department decision that disapproved a 4/3 system of electing the Hillsborough County Commissioners. In all my years of knowing Reece, I never saw him more upset and disturbed than he was that morning when he and his entourage boarded the Eastern Airlines flight and found that I, too, had decided to go to Washington on the same flight. Now my small law office had purchased me a first class ticket on that flight. They passed me sitting in first class as they made their way to the back of the bus – I mean the plane – the coach section – a requirement for those flying on the County’s dime. (A kind of role reversal from the early days in Plant City.) As he walked by me in first class, Reece looked as if he had just finished eating a whole flat of Plant City strawberries. And, to add insult to injury, I was off the plane – in a taxi – in the Justice Department building – and sitting with the DOJ staff attorneys when Reece and his group finally arrived. To put it mildly, Reece was not a happy camper. **Manning vs. The School Board** As it was with a man of his character, Reece did not remain upset very long and over the years that followed we did a number of good things together. Prominent among our later ventures was his kind agreement to assist me and the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund in collecting a nominal attorneys’ fee for more than 45 years of legal work in a case called *Manning vs. The School Board* that involved the effort to desegregate the public schools of Hillsborough County, Florida. Reece did as I asked, and we won and we were able to provide some compensation to the NAACP for the early legal work of such prominent lawyers as Thurgood Marshall (later a Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court) and Constance Baker Motley (later a U.S. District Judge in the Southern District of New York). There also was some direct compensation to the families of attorneys Francisco Rodriguez and James B. Sanderlin (local lawyers who preceded me as lead counsel). And yes, after 27 years of legal work in that case, I finally received some modest compensation for my labor – and so did Carlton Fields. In all of my 73 years of living – my 45 years of practicing law – and my many travels around the world, I am comfortable in saying that I have never met anyone who was singularly more impressive over a long period of time than William Reece Smith, Jr., a man who I was proud to call my friend. In closing, I stopped by to say that I know he will be missed by his family, by his law firm and by the legal community at large – but my real purpose here is to say that he will be missed by the people. For all you did Reece – may you rest in peace! Thank you! Warren Hope Dawson \* **Post Note:** I am advised that in the 1972-1974 time-frame, an Atlanta-based majority-white-law firm may have also hired a black lawyer.

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