

DAILY REPORT

A SMART READ FOR SMART READERS

Haley had impact on firm, legal community, city

FORMER KILPATRICK MANAGING PARTNER, who helped create Fulton drug court, played large role in developing associates at firm

MICHAEL TYLER | Special to the Daily Report



George Haley

WHEN I JOINED the law firm of Kilpatrick & Cody in 1982 following a judicial clerkship on the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, the Atlanta legal community was remarkably different from what it is today. Any firm with

more than 100 lawyers was considered a “large” firm, and all of Atlanta’s large firms were clustered in the Five Points area in Downtown. Given this proximity to the courts, litigators routinely walked to and from trials, hearings and calendar calls and often took meals and drinks at the nearby Commerce Club and Lawyer’s Club.

It was my good fortune to be introduced into this relatively genteel legal world by George B. Haley Jr. When I arrived at Kilpatrick & Cody, George was a senior partner and head of the business litigation group. He had previously served as the firm’s managing partner and clearly was among the most esteemed leaders of the firm. From my very first day at the firm, I was privileged to work under George’s tutelage on a wide variety of litigation matters.

I witnessed first hand the enormous respect and affection for George that was held not only by our clients and the lawyers within our firm, but even more impressively, by other lawyers outside of the firm and by the judiciary.

During my initial years at the firm, George served as chairman of the Associates Committee, which I soon came to understand was a true labor of love. George was every associate’s favorite partner, undoubtedly because he was genuinely committed to helping everyone become not just the best possible lawyer, but more importantly, the best possible person. He was a brilliant legal practitioner who demanded excellence from all who worked with him. While an uncompromising task master, George had the unique ability to inspire young lawyers to achieve exceptional results through patient encouragement and positive feedback, rather than by strident demands or blunt intimidation.

Not only did George have a special gift for training young lawyers to be technically proficient in the art of lawyering, but more significantly, he did so while quietly instilling in us the imperative of embracing the practice of law as an honorable profession requiring honesty and integrity. Within the first few months of working with George, I



Michael Tyler

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learned by example that it was expected that I would be aggressive, zealous and creative in the representation of our clients, but that it was a given that I would always do so with a strict adherence to the highest ethical standards of the profession.

George was not only the quintessential firm mentor in terms of helping my peers and me develop as lawyers, but he also took a keen interest in the overall quality of our lives. He invited us all to his home and to his lake house for social events on numerous occasions. Whenever any associate in the litigation group married, George would insist on throwing a special party in honor of the newlyweds. When I married he even traveled to my wedding in New Orleans and in short order became a lifelong friend of both my wife as well as my mother.

George clearly appreciated the value of a balanced life. His wife Betty and

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their four children were his highest priority. One of his fondest memories, which he often recounted, was the three-month sabbatical that he took with his entire family to Europe. George truly personified the dedicated lawyer who did not sacrifice the reciprocal love of and commitment to family to the heavy demands of the practice of law.

One aspect of George's mentorship that I would be remiss if I failed to mention was his unique empathy towards me as a young African-American lawyer at a time when there were very few lawyers of color at any of the major firms anywhere in the country. As I noted previously, the Atlanta legal community in 1982 was significantly different than today. At that time, none of the city's large law firms had any African-American partners and there were only a handful of associates of color scattered among the various firms. Kilpatrick & Cody was something of a pioneer in this regard, having two incumbent African-American associates when I arrived. While the firm in general was ahead of its time, no single partner was more supportive of the firm's first generation of African-American lawyers than George Haley.

It is quite remarkable that George Haley, a man born in the 1920s and reared in the South during the most oppressive years of racial animus and segregation, would emerge as a quiet champion of equal opportunity within the Atlanta legal community and beyond. George Haley embraced and mentored me and other African-American lawyers in the same manner that he did other associates, not because it was politically correct or because of any contrived effort at promoting greater "diversity." Instead, George did what he did simply because he was a good man.

Perhaps George's sensitivity was born out of his own compelling journey from a working-class background


on the Southside of Atlanta to the pinnacle of Atlanta's legal elite. Having attended Harvard College and Harvard Law School on academic scholarships, George understood that the key to success for many individuals was often simply a matter of their being given an opportunity and the necessary resources to succeed. Consequently, George devoted his time and talent to creating greater opportunities, not just for young lawyers within our firm, but for youth within the community at large. A particularly significant and courageous example of this was George's volunteer work in the 1960s as a spokesman for HOPE (Help Our Public Education), an organization formed to advocate for the peaceful integration of Georgia's public schools. George never boasted about the role he played in helping to end the scourge of educational segregation, and I only learned about his historic service through the recountings of others.

Similarly, most people, even within the legal community, were unaware of the prodigious effort expended by George in the creation of Atlanta's first drug court. When the judges of the Fulton County Superior Court decided to attempt to develop a drug court as a means of providing non-violent, drug-dependent offenders with a rehabilitative alternative to incarceration, George was enlisted to head up this initiative. Due in no small part to George's tireless work and creativity, the Fulton County Felony Drug Court opened in 1997 and has successfully provided thousands of young people with intensive treatment and counseling rather than jail time. A study conducted a decade after the creation of the Drug Court showed that nearly 70 percent of its graduates had not been convicted of any subsequent offense. This was an amazing affirmation of George's belief that young people who had stumbled could redeem themselves and become productive citizens if only given a chance.

I have no doubt that one of the motivating factors that inspired George to continuously reach out to help the youth of our community was his deeply felt appreciation for the encouragement that

he had received as an outstanding student at his beloved Atlanta Boys High. George often spoke of the instrumental role that H. O. Smith, the legendary principal of Boys High, played in helping him gain a scholarship to Harvard. Thus it was not surprising that after his retirement from the active practice of law, George dedicated himself to working with a group of fellow Boys High alumni to create a college scholarship fund to assist students at Grady High School—the successor institution to Boys High. I was particularly delighted to be asked by George to work with him on this project during the final years of his life and to witness the joy and passion with which he pursued this philanthropic endeavor.

As I reflect back on the life of George Haley, I have no doubt that I would not be where I am today but for his unyielding support and guidance, both during my early years at the firm and throughout my entire career. While I have always believed that George chose to devote special attention towards mentoring me, in talking with several of my former associate peers at George's memorial service, I came to find out that each one felt that he or she was in fact the "chosen one." These peers have all gone on to find success through various career paths, but, as we reminisced, all shared fond memories of their early years with George and uniformly expressed the conviction that George was a singularly pivotal figure in their development.

The tremendous impact that George Haley had on my law firm, the Atlanta legal community and the entire city of Atlanta is impossible to measure. There can be no doubt, however, that his legacy will endure in the hearts of all of us who were blessed to know him and who now aspire to emulate his extraordinary achievement of professional excellence and lasting civic contribution. 

A family-placed death notice said that memorial gifts may be made to Hospice Atlanta, 1244 Park Vista Drive, Atlanta, GA 30319, or to the Winship Cancer Institute at Emory, 1762 Clifton Road, Atlanta, GA 30332.