

# *Memorial Resolution*

## Chancellor Tom E. Gray

June 2021

Thomas Ellis Gray, Chancery Court Judge for the 18<sup>th</sup> Judicial District, at age 77, died on Sunday, May 26, 2019, in Hendersonville, Sumner County, Tennessee.

Tom was born on January 19, 1942 to the late George Gray and Adelle Jordan Gray, of Shelbyville, Tennessee. He was the middle child of five children.

His parents made education a priority and began encouraging a college education while the children were in elementary school. His father owned a café and cab stand in Shelbyville and did some farming. In his spare time Tom's father loved to go into the courthouse and talk to his lawyer friends. He would recount stories of cases to the children at the supper table, especially tales from James L. Bomar, Jr. who was a lawyer and later served in the State Senate and House of Representatives, and as lieutenant governor. This impressed Tom and his journey to become an attorney and later a judge began.

After graduation from Central High School in Shelbyville, Tennessee, he attained his Associates Degree from Martin Methodist College as an English major, and attended George Peabody College for his Bachelor and Master of Arts Degrees.

Tom began his career as a teacher at Brainerd High School in Chattanooga, then at Martin Methodist College in Pulaski, where he served as Director of Admissions, Dean of Student Services, Dean of Administration, and, at the young age of 29, accepted the role as President of Martin Methodist College. During this time, Tom married Christie Lee Link Gray and had two children, Sean C. Gray and Shannon Gray (Svoboda), both born in Pulaski.

In order to pursue his law degree at Nashville School of Law, Tom and Christie made the decision to move to Gallatin, Tennessee where Dr. Hal Raymer offered him a position at Volunteer State Community College as Dean of Students. Tom

graduated and passed the Bar Exam in 1980, and began the practice of law in the office of attorney Charles Beaty.

In 1982 the Sumner County Commissioners created a second General Sessions Judge position, and Tom decided to run for the position. In addition to attending all the local events, Tom would stand on the side of the road wearing his trademark suspenders beginning at 5:00 in the morning and staying until dark, holding a campaign sign. He won the position by a 3 to 1 margin and became Sumner County's first General Sessions Judge, Division II, also known as "Family Court".

In 1986, after the 18<sup>th</sup> Judicial District was made a single county district, Tom ran unopposed for Chancery Court Judge and became Chancellor of the 18<sup>th</sup> Judicial District. Tom was re-elected in 1990, 1998 and 2006, serving as Chancellor until his retirement in 2014.

At his retirement dinner family, friends, co-workers and the legal community turned out to honor him. Tom was showered with loving praise and memories. Presentations were made from Sumner County Executive Anthony Holt, Proclamations from the Tennessee House and Senate by Ferrell Haile and William Lamberth, he was honored by Governor Bill Haslam with a Day of Recognition, United States Senators Bob Corker and Lamar Alexander and Congresswoman Diane Black sent Letters of Congratulations and a Congressional Record Statement and the sitting President of the United States of America Barack Obama sent a Greeting from the White House.

Tom Gray was an active member of the First United Methodist Church of Gallatin for over 30 years. After the death of his first wife Christie, Tom married Janice Sandlin Gray and moved to Hendersonville, Tennessee where he joined the First United Methodist Church of Hendersonville.

Tom deeply loved his family and doted on his two grandchildren. He was known to often wear a Mickey Mouse tie, suspenders or cuff links under his robe in the courtroom. He loved pie and would often eat dessert before his dinner! His desk was layers of papers and files but no one dared move anything or try to organize the chaos because he said he knew where everything was. He would go home for lunch and watch a part of a Western movie to unwind even if he was in the middle of a highly contested and stressful trial. Tom's late first wife Christie Gray, second

wife Janice Gray, and daughter Shannon Gray Svoboda were all kindergarten teachers.

Tom Strongly believed in service and giving back to the community. He was a member of the Gallatin Noon Rotary, where he served as past president and coordinated the committee for Christmas for Kids for many years. Each year he contacted local elementary schools for names of students whose families needed help at Christmas time, and would call each family personally inviting the students for a shopping event and a cart full of groceries. He was also Chair of the Sumner County Public Records Commission, Past President and Chair for ByLaws of the Sumner County Historical Society, on the Boards of the Rosemont Society and Bledsoe Lick Historical Society, and served on the Campaign Committee for a new Gallatin Downtown Public Library. Tom served as Adjunct faculty at Volunteer State Community College teaching Business Law and Wills, Trusts and Estates, served on the Advisory Board for the Magnet School, volunteered for Habitat for Humanity, and was on the Volunteer State Community College Foundation and the Board of the Sumner County Museum.

Chancellor Gray was a member of the Sumner County Bar Association and was often an instructor for CLE's, participated in Law Day Programs in Sumner County Schools, hosted student groups at the Courthouse, and had plays for them to act out as teaching tools. As a judge, he often spoke at civic clubs, schools, churches and elder care homes on subjects of law.

As a member of the Tennessee Bar Association Tom was on the Domestic Relations Code Committee and helped develop the Alimony Bench Book. At the Tennessee Judicial Conference Chancellor Gray served on the Education Committee, Domestic Relations Committee, Bench/Bar Relations Committee, the Supreme Court Commission on Gender Fairness (1996). He also served as Secretary of the Tennessee Judicial Conference under Irvin Kilcrease Jr., the first African American Chancellor in Tennessee, and as Treasurer while Judge Steve Daniel was President.

Chancellor Tom E. Gray was interviewed by Chancellor Carol L. McCoy as a part of the Tennessee Bar Foundation's Legal History Project to preserve the record of

the legal profession in Tennessee about the lives and experiences in the law, as well as the social and political issues of their day.

The people around Tom Gray, whether at Martin Methodist College, Volunteer State Community College, Sumner County General Sessions Court, or Chancery Court found him to be a true gentleman, gracious and kind and deeply respected. As a Judge in his courtroom Chancellor Gray was always fair, kind, meticulous and gracious. He was a Jurist. He always treated everyone with the same respect, no matter who they were or where they came from. Tom Gray was a shining example of how to live a life devoted to family, profession, faith and service while acting in a way that is caring, patient, fair and respectful of all people. He was a role model for us all.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Tennessee Judicial Conference on this 16<sup>th</sup> day of June 2021, that this resolution in honor of our departed colleague and friend Chancellor Tom E. Gray be entered on the minutes of this conference, that a copy be furnished to West Publishing Company for publication in **Tennessee Decisions**, and that a copy be furnished to the family.

Respectfully submitted by:

Chancellor Louis W. Oliver III,  
18<sup>th</sup> Judicial District