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RANDOLPH THROWER—A PERSONAL REMEMBRANCE

*Steve Gottlieb**

Randolph Thrower was an extraordinary man, but I did not get a chance to meet him until after everyone already knew that. In fact, I met him because of the unique reputation he had with lawyers throughout Atlanta.

I knew Randolph had long been famous in the Atlanta legal community when I met him in 1983. I knew he had been IRS Commissioner, and he famously resigned when President Nixon tried to have IRS target his “enemies list.” I knew he had run for office in order to make Georgia a two-party state. I knew he was renowned for his legal prowess. And I knew he had been President of the Board of the Atlanta Legal Aid Society in 1953. But I did not know who he was as a person until our meeting.

The occasion for my meeting Randolph was an existential threat to Atlanta Legal Aid. We had received support from the federal government since the mid-1960s, first from the Office of Economic Opportunity and then from the Legal Services Corporation (LSC). The upside was that Legal Aid’s budget had dramatically increased with federal funding; we had added more lawyers, opened offices in DeKalb and Cobb Counties, added three new offices in the City, created a special project for seniors, and significantly increased our services. But these new funds came with a price. By the early 1980s over 75% of our funds came from one source—LSC.

The existential threat was that the new President, Ronald Reagan, after conflicts with legal services providers as Governor of California, had vowed to end all federal funding for legal aid to the poor. By 1983, President Reagan had gotten part way toward that goal; LSC funding was cut by about 25% and subject to total elimination. In response, we laid off staff and closed offices. But that was not enough.

Enter Paula Lawton Bevington.

Paula was our upcoming Board President, and she strongly believed that the Atlanta legal community should shoulder a large share of the responsibility for supporting Atlanta Legal Aid. Years before we had done a mail solicitation

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for funds from Atlanta's lawyers—and barely made up our costs. Paula had a different idea. She envisioned a peer-to-peer solicitation chaired by someone whose leadership in the bar was recognized by the entire legal community. That person of course was Randolph Thrower.

Paula knew Randolph from her time as a young lawyer with Sutherland, Asbill & Brennan. She arranged for us to meet Randolph and propose the idea of an annual campaign among lawyers. Without a moment's hesitation, Randolph accepted.

He quickly made the idea his own. In his typical egalitarian fashion, he proposed that lawyers would be pacesetters to the campaign if they donated \$100 to Atlanta Legal Aid, and that law firms, regardless of size, would be pacesetter firms if they donated \$100 for each of their partners and associates. Because of who he was, that first year we raised over \$150,000 from hundreds of lawyers and many prominent law firms like King & Spalding, Alston & Bird, and of course from Randolph's own firm, Sutherland Asbill & Brennan.

Randolph's great insight was that he realized that as Atlanta grew, so would the size of its legal community—and so would our support. Now over thirty years later, using his same campaign model, we raise over \$1.6 million annually.

After that initial campaign, Randolph became reengaged with Legal Aid. He helped us create an endowment to protect against new losses of federal funding. (In the years of the Great Recession, support from that endowment saved the program from dramatic staff reductions and new office closings.) He lobbied for funding for legal aid in Washington and supported our applications for funding for special projects. He helped us start a Senior Attorney Program. At Legal Aid's 75th Anniversary, we presented Randolph an award for his many years of service to the program. Then First Lady Hilary Clinton sent videotaped congratulations.

Just this past year, to punctuate over sixty years of support, he and his family made a donation of \$100,000 (in honor of his 100th birthday) to our new headquarters at 54 Ellis Street. As a result the beautiful wrought iron gates at the entrance to the building will be named the "Randolph and Margaret Thrower Gates to Justice." (This gift was in addition to a generous gift from Sutherland Asbill & Brennan which was also made on the occasion of Randolph's 100th birthday.)

No one has given more to Atlanta Legal Aid; yet, what I remember most about Randolph is how he was as a person.

I remember how he modeled our Senior Attorney program by handling a case with one of our lawyers, Sue Jamieson, for a client in the Georgia Mental Health Institute (GMHI). He was very concerned about how the law dealt with clients who had mental disabilities. Always the gentleman, he would drive to our Decatur Office, pick Sue up and drive them both to GMHI to meet with the client.

I remember how the two of us went to Washington to lobby. He was scheduled to go for a meeting with former IRS Commissioners. He took me along so we could urge congressmen whom he knew to support continued funding for legal aid. Randolph was in his seventies at the time, and he arranged for us to fly to the capital at about six o'clock in the morning. We then met with numerous congressmen, after which he went to his meeting and flew back to Atlanta that same day.

Mostly, I remember how he treated me from the first day we met. He accorded me the utmost respect—with a dignity that one usually reserves for someone of equal stature. I would like to think it was me, but he treated everyone with that same respect (although I do think we had a special fondness between us). What I will most remember about Randolph was that sense of humility. He showed me that humility is one of the basic traits of leadership, and it is what really set him apart.

Atlanta Legal Aid is truly indebted to Randolph Thrower for what he did to support us for over sixty years, and I am indebted to him for what he taught me along the way.