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“A Lesson in Tradition”



A Lesson In Tradition — Part One

ABISHI CUNNINGHAM

By Alisa Bailey

Just down the street from the court house, above the local drug store is the office of Abishi Cunningham. The steps up to his office are worn and sloping in the middle. The hallway is crammed with filing cabinets and the golden oak shelves are overburdened with law books.

Coming in from Family Law Master Court, Abishi Cunningham tosses his dress hat on the clothes tree as if he were 23-years-old instead of 87.

Why don't young men wear hats anymore? They should. Abishi does . . .

After graduating from West Virginia State College, Abishi Cunningham was forced to go to law school out of state because at that time West Virginia University would not accept black students.

Nevertheless, after attending Iowa State, Abishi returned to Welch to practice law.

He has never had trouble being accepted in his home town.

“My clientele has always been mixed, and I've always been accepted by the local community. Likewise, I've always accepted any case that ever comes in the door be it criminal, civil or whatever,” he boasts.

Abishi's father moved to Welch from North Carolina, and Welch has always been home.

87-years old, Abishi is still going strong. *I had to wait for him in his office while he was in front of the family law master, and the interview had to proceed with haste since he was due to appear in circuit court within the half hour.*

“I've remained busy throughout my life, and I have no desire to retire now,” he said.

Handsome attired in a blue and white shirt and red suspenders, he lights up a cigarette and relishes the smoky ambiance it creates.

“Yes, whatever comes along, I try to handle it,” he reiterates.

Abishi feels that the law has changed somewhat over the years, however. He says that there are more criminal appointments than ever before.

“Since the inception of the magistrate system, I've seen more criminal matters.”

“My practice changes with the economy, too,” he says. Welch, once a wealthy coal town, has fallen upon hard times in recent years. The economic climate has an immediate, tangible effect on his law practice.

“When you work for working people, the economy can have a tremendous effect upon your practice,” he explains. Abishi represents quite a few coal miners, products of McDowell County's biggest industry.

Abishi has two children, both of whom are lawyers.

“Abishi Cunningham, Jr., is a circuit judge in Chicago,” he says with pride, “and, Marjorie, my daughter, is associated with the District Attorney's Office in Chicago.”

Both graduated law school from Northwestern, and decided to stay.”

Abishi married a local girl, who taught school before retiring. They visit their children about once every two years.

Many years ago, Abishi ran for the West Virginia House of Delegates on the Republican ticket.

“But, it's not just hard for a Republican to win in McDowell County — it's impossible!”

At one time he was an avid bridge player, but he has since given up the game. Why?

“Because all my partners died,” he explains.

He's had so many secretaries over the years, he's lost count. His current secretary Monica Headen, a native New Yorker, enjoys working for Abishi.

“I like him because he's down to earth. He tells you what he needs, but he lets you take control of your domain,” she says.

He's smoked cigarettes since he was 18. He has a busy court schedule. In fact, he's busier now than ever.

Just like the aging stone buildings of this beloved Welch, Abishi Cunningham stands the test of time with grace.