

The Modern American

Volume 2

Issue 2 Summer 2006 Commemorative Sylvania
Woods Issue

Article 3

2006

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Recommended Citation

Mitchell-Crump, Pamela. "A Phenomenal Man: Judge Sylvania Woods." *The Modern American*, Summer 2006, 3.

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A Phenomenal Man: Judge Sylvania Woods

Keywords

Judge Sylvania Webb Woods

A PHENOMENAL MAN: JUDGE SYLVANIA WOODS

*By Pamela Mitchell-Crump, Ed.D**

Judge Sylvania Webb Woods, more affectionately known as “Uncle Butley,” was truly one of a kind. He was, and still is, my favorite uncle. Despite his status as a judge for Prince George’s County, Maryland, he was one of the most down to earth, giving individuals I have ever known. He always helped others in need. He loved to talk about the law, his humble beginnings, family, and the importance of education. I remember him offering to pay for me to attend law school when I was an undergraduate studying Justice and Law Administration. My maternal grandmother, his sister, told me that when my uncle was a young teenager, he would sit in front of the fireplace at night and talk about the importance of an education.

One of the most memorable occasions with my uncle was back in 1993 when my family and I traveled in a van from Massachusetts, stopping in Connecticut to pick up my grandmother, his only surviving older sister, then on to Maryland to get him to travel to Alabama for a family reunion. Uncle Butley was surprised and very pleased by the spunkiness of the van we drove -- an Oldsmobile Silhouette. He was so pleased that he proceeded to take over the wheel and do the majority of the driving. He drove, told many interesting stories, and we frequently stopped to get a bite to eat. Talking and eating were two things my Uncle truly enjoyed.

It was the night of the family reunion banquet. My uncle, Judge Sylvania Woods, was the featured speaker. The tone, tenor, and skill with which he delivered his presentation were impressive, to say the least, inspirational, and uplifting. He delivered a message to which people of all ages and educational levels could relate. His commitment to his work, and true love for and desire to help the disenfranchised and underrepresented populations of society that had no voice, came through loud and clear in his message.

Just being around my uncle was a treat. He was always full of stories, sharing personal experiences, words of wisdom, and

encouraging me -- as well as hundreds of others -- as evidenced by the testimonies given at his going home service, to be true to yourself, help others who are less fortunate than yourself, and the importance of education.

During those times when my uncle was ill, my grandmother and I would go visit him and he always seemed to be very pleased to see us. He would still do a lot of talking and sharing interesting stories or words of wisdom. In my uncle’s last days, I shared my deepest thoughts and feelings about him, with him; primarily, thanking him for being himself, his unselfish giving of himself—heart, mind and money, and the joys of sharing precious time with him. He truly was a blessing in my life and the lives of many others. I tried to comfort him with my words knowing in my heart that he would soon be going to a much better place along with his mother, my great grandmother, and an older sister and three older brothers. He was too weak to respond to my words. This uncharacteristic phenomenon of my uncle not being able to speak made my heart cry. The deafening silence of not hearing his voice was a true sign that the end was near. I often think of my uncle and envision him in all his grandeur in Heaven. This time, however, in a white robe with gold trim, still telling stories in God’s Kingdom.

American University Washington College of Law’s tribute to my uncle, his words, and work through an annual conference is truly a wonderful acknowledgement and tribute to a legendary man. A heartfelt thank you goes out to all those who help plan and administer the conference each year. The fact that the conference is in its tenth year is a testament to American University’s commitment to the man and his mission. I thank the University, its conference planners, all conference participants and attendees for keeping my uncle, Judge Sylvania Woods’ memory alive.

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