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TRIBUTE TO SAM DAVIS: A GEORGIA PERSPECTIVE

*Ronald L. Carlson**

Samuel M. Davis is a consummate legal educator. For this reason I was honored when *Mississippi Law Journal* Editor Marie Wicks asked me to write a tribute to Sam. I was to comment on his life and professional career, with some emphasis upon his service at the University of Georgia.

Sam Davis had a twenty-seven year history at Georgia, commencing in 1970. After a distinguished record as a student at the University of Mississippi School of Law, he joined the Georgia law faculty. Sam moved through the academic ranks, ultimately becoming Allen Post Professor of Law. Along the way he served, at various times, as Assistant Dean, as Associate Dean, and he was for a time the University's Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs. In 1997 he took over as Dean at the University of Mississippi School of Law.

A few personal remembrances are appropriate. There are no limits on the impact we can make in the world if we do not care who gets credit for the ultimate achievements we help to secure. Sam is one of those selfless people who glories in the success of others, particularly those whom he has helped along the way. I am one of the recipients of his generosity. When the University of Georgia inaugurated the University-wide Josiah Meigs award, the law school decided I would be the law school candidate for this all-school recognition. The other departments of the University also entered candidates in this initial competition.

A word about Josiah Meigs, the namesake of this sought-after honor. He was the president of the University of Georgia when it was built, an admirable founder. Meigs was a Yale graduate. "Into his hands was now cast the difficult duty of molding a university—a work the gigantic importance of which he

* Fuller E. Callaway Professor of Law Emeritus, University of Georgia. J.D. 1959, Northwestern (Clarion Dewitt Hardy Scholar); LL.M. 1961, Georgetown (E. Barrett Prettyman Fellow).

keenly realized.”¹ Under his supervision in 1801 “the woodsman’s ax was busy clearing out a campus, and men with chains and pegs were staking off the sites for various structures.”² At last the first buildings were complete. “A new sun had risen in Georgia.”³

Appropriately, the Meigs award was named after this venerated educator. Achieving success in the competitive environment surrounding the naming of the first University-wide Meigs Award winners would take painstaking effort by those undertaking the assignment of preparing the nomination papers. That task fell to our Associate Dean Sam Davis. I well remember entering the Dean’s conference room where Sam had papers from end to end on the big conference table. He was poring over documents and reports, course evaluations and letters of recommendation. Sam was seeking exactly the right tone for the nomination dossier, thorough but not stiff or boring. In the end, Sam’s organizational and writing skills prevailed. His labors were successful. The writer of this tribute to Professor Davis became a Meigs Award recipient.

Strong friendships were shared by Sam with colleagues at the University of Georgia. Sam seemed to live by the words of statesman Charles F. Raymond: “As you go through life let your good fellowship follow you as the ripples follow the wake of the ship. If you have any kindness to do, do it now. If you have any one you should encourage, do it now[.] [P]ass on the sunshine and don’t wait until it is too late.”⁴

Sam applied these principles in his daily life and as a result left a legacy of fond memories at UGA. One of the firm friendships which Sam formed was with Professor Donald Eugene Wilkes, Jr., one of the nation’s leading experts on post-conviction and habeas corpus law. Of Sam Davis, Professor Wilkes said this in 2016:

I have known Sam as a friend and colleague for over forty years. As a friend I know he is even-tempered, kind, trustworthy, and forthright, not just to me but to everyone he encounters. He is a gentleman who never lacks sympathy for the underdog or the oppressed. As a colleague I know he is an

¹ E. MERTON COULTER, COLLEGE LIFE IN THE OLD SOUTH 11 (1979).

² *Id.* at 12.

³ *Id.* at 13.

⁴ CHARLES F. RAYMOND, JUST BE GLAD 93 (1907).

accomplished, dedicated scholar whose prolific writings are pellucid and persuasive. His magnificent commitment to justice and fairness astonishes. It is no wonder that he is one of the nation's leading authorities on children in the legal system and on the law of juvenile courts. Sam has succeeded in what I know has always been one of his goals as a law professor and legal scholar: making this a more just and therefore a better world. I am fortunate indeed to have been associated with Sam Davis, whose heart is merciful and filled with compassion for the poor, the helpless, and the underprivileged.

Professor Wilkes and I shared many lunches with Sam. These meetings were marked by good fellowship and stimulating conversation. They lasted through Sam's tenure as Associate Dean of Law as well as during his time as Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs. Lunch with Sam was always a bright spot in the day.

As a legal writer, Sam Davis was at his best when tracing legal principles related to children and the law. The rights of juveniles are always important to him, and that is clearly reflected in his casebooks, treatises and articles. It is also reflected in his teaching. Along with courses like criminal law and criminal procedure, he has taught classes in Children in the Legal System and Juvenile Courts Seminar.

During his time both in Georgia and Mississippi, Sam Davis made a positive difference. His affirmative approach and gentle spirit will long be remembered. Football icon Vince Lombardi said perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection we can catch excellence. Sam always pursued perfection, and attained more than excellence.

