



Photo by Zach Porter Photography

by Charles L. Ruffin

# The Wonderful Life of Cliff Brashier

**O**n the Friday before Christmas, we received the devastating news that Cliff Brashier, executive director of the State

Bar of Georgia for the past two decades, had lost his battle with cancer. Everyone associated with the State Bar immediately realized the tremendous loss we had just suffered. Cliff was not only a superb leader of this organization, but to many of us he was one of our closest friends.

After the holiday season, several hundred of Cliff's closest friends gathered at the Bar Center on Jan. 8, for a memorial service, titled "In Celebration of Cliff Brashier."

To begin the service, we were led by Stephanie Wilson of our Communications Department, accompanied by ICLE Associate Director Douglas Ashworth, in singing "Amazing Grace." At the end, we sang Cliff's home-state anthem, "Yellow Rose of Texas."

**"For those of us in Bar leadership and on the Bar staff, Cliff had the unique ability to impart wise counsel without you knowing he was doing it—until you realized it later."**

Between the songs, several of us did our best to express what Cliff had meant to us personally, to the operations of the State Bar, to the legal profession and to the justice system. Our words were, of course, punctuated by some tears and, because of the person Cliff was, much laughter. In this article, as a tribute to Cliff, I would like to share part of what my colleagues and I had to say.

"Encapsulating a life as big as Cliff's in a few moments is like stuffing the Lone Star State into Rhode Island. And

we remember Cliff was a proud Texan," said Jeff Davis, director of the Judicial Qualifications Commission. "Hebrews 13:7 tells us, 'Remember your leaders . . . Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.' Cliff was a man of unwavering faith, faith not only in his God, but faith in his family, this organi-

zation, the State Bar, that he served so sacrificially. As the writer of Hebrews suggests, let us now take time to remember our leader Cliff, consider the outcome of his way of life and imitate it."

The phrase "leading from behind" has entered our political lexicon these days, and it is not meant as compliment when ascribed to a public office holder. But "leading from behind the scenes" is a wholly different matter, and that is what Cliff did with such expertise. So many Bar initiatives over the years were successful because of his vision, his direction and his work.

As one Bar president after another would come in full of vigor and big ideas and leave 12 months later fulfilled but exhausted and eager to hand the gavel over to the next person, Cliff was always there. While the Bar's budget was growing from \$3 million to \$10 million, while the Bar was growing from 24,000 members to 46,000, while the Bar staff was increasing from 47 employees to 88, while the Bar Center building was being purchased and then developed into the finest such facility in the nation, while our CLE programs expanded to meet the needs of a growing profession, Cliff was the constant presence, providing the strong, consistent leadership that has carried this organization to such great heights.

As Chief Justice Hugh Thompson of the Supreme Court of Georgia said, "Cliff was like the Bar's support beam. When you see a beautiful building, you never see the support beam. But Cliff was never seeking the glory or attention for himself. He wanted to uphold our profession to make it the best it could be."

For those of us in Bar leadership and on the Bar staff, Cliff had the unique ability to impart wise counsel without you knowing he was doing it—until you realized it later.

Yet he always made sure that others got the credit. He never wanted



Cliff Brashier, Executive Director, State Bar of Georgia, 1993-2013

the limelight and would go to great lengths to avoid it. For someone so vital to an organization of this size, Cliff was the most humble person you would ever meet.

That is why, not long after his portrait was placed in the executive office suite of the Bar Center, he had it taken down. (It has now been re-hung.)

That is why, at every Annual Meeting, he would barely acknowledge the thunderous applause that would always accompany the Board's unanimous vote to re-elect him as Executive Director—not because he wasn't appreciative of the recognition, but because he no doubt thought that the less he reacted, the sooner it would be over.

That is why this *summa cum laude* graduate of Midwestern University, who earned his J.D. degree from the University of Texas School of Law and his L.L.M. degree from the Emory University School of Law, was first honor graduate of the MBA program at the Emory University School of Business, this member of the Alpha Chi and Beta Gamma Sigma National Honorary Societies—if he ever mentioned his academic background at all—would simply refer to himself as a "P.E. major."

That is why he would have been horrified to know that our newly published history book on the legal profession in Georgia, which went to press before his

passing, was dedicated to him—but I am so glad now that we made that decision.

The respect that Cliff earned in his position of leadership was so high that, said 2003-04 Bar President Bill Barwick, “Like a number of people over the years that I have met who claimed to have been at Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium when Hank Aaron hit his 715th home run, I’ve met at least 750 people who say they were on the committee that helped select Cliff Brashier to be the executive director of the State Bar.”

Last July, shortly after I took office, I got a call from Cliff. He opened the conversation by saying, “Buck, I want you to know that you’re going to have a great year, and I am going to do all that I can to help you in any way that you need me.” Then, he shared with me the news that he had been diagnosed with a serious illness and the schedule of treatments and surgery that he would be facing in the months ahead.

That was the quintessential Cliff Brashier. Before talking about his own health, he wanted to talk about helping me during this Bar year. For Cliff, it was always about putting others first, emphasizing the Bar programs, the Bar staff and the Bar leadership before himself. You also need to know this: Cliff approved the Board of Governors’ agenda for our Midyear Meeting from his hospital room the morning of Dec. 20, the day he died.

John Sammon, who in 1993-94 was the first Bar president during Cliff’s service as executive director and actually was on the selection committee that hired Cliff, said of Cliff’s leadership and management skills, “If a Bar leader had an impetuous notion, and all of us did, Cliff was able to put us back on the right path without us ever really knowing that he had done so . . . Cliff was the best manager of people that I’ve ever been around. He was beloved by the people that worked for him. He was an excellent listener. He never had to

demand respect to receive respect. He had a unique way of motivating his co-workers. He was dedicated to his profession. Knowing him made me a better person. He made the Bar what it is today. He made the world a better place and managed to do all this without sacrificing his all-important family life.”

The memorial service was, as I mentioned, a time for tears and a time for laughter. We knew that while Cliff would have preferred no attention at all, he certainly would not have wanted a gathering in his memory to be a sad occasion. After all, did you ever not feel better after any conversation with Cliff? They nearly always concluded with one of his multitude of jokes, intended to take the edge off any heavy subject of a conversation.

My predecessor, 2012-13 Bar President Robin Frazer Clark, spoke of the “literally thousands” of emails she and Cliff had exchanged, recalling, “Cliff would usually set the tone of the email with the subject line. For example, you knew you were in trouble when the subject line read ‘Have an aspirin ready when you read this.’ Or, ‘Have a bourbon in hand when you read this.’ Another favorite subject line was ‘Not making this up,’ and after that came, ‘Cannot make this up.’ . . . But the best emails from Cliff had the subject line ‘To brighten your day,’ and these emails included some little story about friendship, leadership, the Golden Rule, kindness to one another or just love of your fellow man. And Cliff sent those to me on a regular basis just to brighten my day.”

During the Christmas season, I again watched one of my favorite movies, “It’s a Wonderful Life.” As you know, Jimmy Stewart stars as the long-suffering George Bailey, who time after time is required by life’s circumstances to put his own dreams on hold in order to help others, rescue the family business and preserve his hometown’s way of life. When facing his greatest

crisis, George is on a bridge on the outskirts of Bedford Falls, praying to God to show him the way to deal with his desperate situation. At that moment, another person jumps from the bridge into the icy waters below. Instinctively, George jumps in to rescue the man, who turns out to be an angel named Clarence.

After George tells Clarence he wishes he had never been born, the angel is able to show George what the world would have been like without him, all the lives that he touched in a positive way, and how much worse things would have been for the people and the town that he loved had he not been born.

It occurred to me the fictional story of George Bailey is analogous to the real life of Cliff Brashier. When you think of the positive impact that Cliff had on so many State Bar employees, Georgia lawyers and judges, members of the Board of Governors and Executive Committee, Bar officers, CLE participants, students who take the “Journey Through Justice” field trip here at the Bar Center, members of the middle school girls’ basketball team he coached at The Walker School, family members and friends, there is no question that Cliff Brashier, too, had a wonderful life and was a wonderful man.

As Bill Smith, who served as the Bar’s general counsel alongside Cliff for most of his tenure, said from the perspective of the Bar staff, “A lot of us have been here a long time. People don’t stay where they are not happy. This is a happy place to be. It’s happy because Cliff made it so. He had a leadership style that was honed by life experiences. I think his time as a tennis player served him well in that regard. I think his favorite book must have been *The Art of Lawn Tennis* by William Tilden, because he was always quoting from it: ‘Above all, never change a winning game. Always change a losing game.’ Somehow he had the ability to recognize the two and act accordingly.”



Cliff's wife Tammy, his daughters and other family members joined us for the service on Jan. 8, and we were honored to have his eldest daughter, Loren Gleason, speak about her father as a Bar leader and a family man. "He was devoted to the Bar, and you were like family to him," she said. "He was brilliant, and he was so accomplished, but he would be the last to tell you those things. He made it his goal for others to be happy, and he would often close a text message or a voicemail by saying, 'Have fun.' He taught me so much in life. He would always say that anything that is worth doing is worth doing well, that someone shouldn't have to ask for your help, but you should see that they need help and just start helping."

Everyone who knew Cliff Brashier received many valuable life lessons. In fact, in this time of grief, we are comforted in knowing that we have been left with a great gift—a guiding principle that we all picked up from having Cliff in our lives. We can use it whenever we need direction with a professional decision, an ethical dilemma or merely our daily efforts to serve others and further the cause of justice.

This gift is a simple question that we can ask ourselves. Only four words:

What would Cliff do? 

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## ON THE COVER: A Special Thank You to Georgia's Lawyer-Legislators

For a number of years, the State Bar of Georgia has enjoyed great success with our Bar-supported legislative initiatives earning approval in the General Assembly and being signed into law by the governor. Some of the major legislation we have supported includes the new evidence code approved in 2011, criminal justice reform package of 2012, an overhaul of the juvenile justice code in 2013 and, also last year, legislation making attorney malpractice claims unassignable.

Without a doubt, a contributing factor in this success has been the support of our fellow Georgia lawyers who serve as elected members of the state Senate and House of Representatives. We are most appreciative of these dedicated men and women and the personal and professional sacrifices they must make in order to run for office every two years and spend a major part of each year at the Capitol.

We are glad they are there, not only to serve the interests of their constituents from their home districts, but also to use their experience and expertise in the law to have a positive impact on the legislative process. The participation of these lawyer-legislators in shaping public policy helps ensure that the laws enacted are consistent with Georgia values and compliant with the Constitutions of our state and our nation.

On behalf of the Bar leadership, I want to take this opportunity to thank our lawyer-legislators for their extraordinary service, and I ask each of you to do the same when you can.

— State Bar President Charles L. Ruffin

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