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Events](#)[Publications](#)[The Alliance](#)[DRI Europe](#)[Archive](#)**This Week's Double Feature****Ode to Home: Mother's Words Bring Life to the Practice of
Law****By C. Meade Hartfield*****Lightfoot, Franklin & White, L.L.C., Birmingham, AL***

My mother has a knack for saying funny little phrases that, with her thick southern accent, just seem to stick with me. Her quips have become my mantras for enjoying life and the practice of law. Here are just a select few of her wise words.

“Sing, baby, sing.”

I grew up with a passion for music, and my mother sat through many vocal solos in many settings. She used to eagerly tell me before I went on stage, “just sing.” It was such a simple phrase that meant so much more. She wanted me to relax, focus on the message of the song and connect with the audience. The same principle applies in practicing law. Whether your audience is a judge or jury, you want to engage them in your message. To do that, you must forget about the microphone, the size of the room, all the eyeballs on you and the number of listening ears. You must get motivated about the meaning behind your message and the need to captivate, entertain and move your audience as they sit in their seats.

Anyone who has ever performed in the courtroom, be it through a jury trial or motion practice, can appreciate the difference between an experience where you were so focused on the expectations of those around you that you failed to meet them, and an argument where your phrasing rolled off the tongue like prose from Walt Whitman. A bad experience will teach you that if you allow the setting to distract you, you miss the exhilaration of the moment, and you sacrifice the effectiveness of your argument.

A song tells a story, and so must your oral argument. Just as important as the correct song choice, you must tell the story in a way that complements your vocal abilities, one in which you feel comfortable and about which you are passionate to share. Mother knew that, as a singer, I had to let go and yield to the music and just “sing, baby, sing.” A talented litigator who does the same with his or her argument will be equally well received.

“Be good. Be quick. Be done.”

Many lawyers love the sound of their voices, and like a broken record, they play their song too loudly and too long. But brevity

packs more punch, and my mother has always understood that. Anytime I had a speech to give at school, Mother pulled out the old zinger, "Be good. Be quick. Be done." Mother understood that people have short attention spans. The last thing you want is for people to tune you out because they are tired of your voice or its regurgitated message. Make your points; make them well; and move on. If you feel you must hammer home a particular argument, find a fresh way to say it – every time.

"Stand up!"

You would never know it by looking at her, a pillar of poise and strength, but Mother is a little bit of a rebel, maybe a lot. She has never been afraid to go against the grain of popular opinion, does not cave to peer pressure, and stands firm for her principles. As she puts it, you have to "stand up!" and plant your feet for things that matter. There is nothing more entertaining to me than to watch her get fired up about something in which she believes. If she is seated, her back comes off the chair and her already erect posture becomes more pronounced, as she raises her always polished hand to make a point. If standing, she stands tall with her shoulders square to the person with whom she is debating, so that she can meet their gaze dead on and be fully engaged in the discussion. With grace and conviction, she captivates your attention, and your ears perk up because you want to hear what she has to say.

Much the same, good lawyers fight hard for their cause, with panache. They channel their passion for finding the truth in a given situation, and they bring it with enthusiasm to the center of the judge and jury's attention. They rally and inspire their legal team to find creative ways to tell the story and win the case. They do not give in to the majority opinion if their minority position would yield the right result, and they search incessantly for a way to shed new light on old theories to fit the facts at hand. Good lawyers will always "stand up!" when it is time to do so.

"Work won't kill you. Worry will."

Those in my household were never short on work ethic. Mother made sure. But Mother also made sure that we tempered our drive for productivity with a reality check on our emotions and physical health. While Mother very much believes in hard work, she does not believe in getting worked up with worry over the task at hand. Rather than internalizing what may seem like an overwhelming, monumental task, Mother has always encouraged me to take one thing at a time, to put one foot in front of the other, to make forward progress. By focusing my energy on what I can do and then doing that, I can see in retrospect just how much I have actually accomplished, certainly a great deal more than if I waste my energy fretting.

Practicing law can be stressful. You worry over deadlines and stress about contributing to the firm's bottom line success. You fret over scheduling quagmires and how much time it takes to get even the smallest thing accomplished. You agonize over why you cannot find the case that you know must be out there . . . somewhere, in some state, where some court must have put your brilliant thought in writing. Sometimes you are just so tired

and your perspective so distorted, worry feels like your constant companion. When it gets to be too much, take a minute and regroup. Remember yourself. Do what you can, when you can. Stop and rest. Then pick up where you left off. Your productivity will explode, unlike your health and sanity.

“It’s a ‘flamingo’ day.”

After I started practicing law, my parents moved to the beach. Whenever I called in the mornings to check on them, I would ask Mother how she was doing. “Oh, it’s another ‘flamingo’ day,” usually said while drinking out of a bright pink coffee mug decorated with tropical trees and a flamingo-neck handle. My mother made a point to say she was simply enjoying her day. At first, I am sure she shared her flamingo perspective, based on the enthusiasm of her newly found freedom in the sun and sand. However, “flamingo” became a staple word in her vocabulary and, after a while, I understood that the phrase was really a directive to me, a Mother-knows-best instruction to soak up the simple pleasures of each day.

If ever the burdens of litigation seem heavier than a stack of treatises, my mother’s words ring in my ear, and I am instantly reminded to enjoy the sunshine, appreciate the people around me, and to regain my perspective on the value of contentment and joy in such a demanding profession. I am reminded to take pleasure in the profession and to make the most of each moment. Lighten your load today, and remember that every day should be “a flamingo day.”

“Everybody has two choices in life: right or wrong. Choose right.”

Whenever I was faced with a dilemma growing up, and even today, Mother has always been wise enough not to tell me what decision to make. Instead, she listens closely and serves only as a sounding board and a facilitator to my own decision making. One statement she has made consistently over the years is, “choose right.” Everybody needs that simple reminder. Lawyers need it every day.

As professionals, lawyers are tasked with an extra layer of fiduciary duties, and we are constantly faced with ethical obligations that compel us to cling to this principle. Recording time accurately; billing clients appropriately; negotiating settlement at the logical time, in a truthful way with opposing counsel; doing thorough research and briefing – each task presents a choice. Choose wisely; choose to do the right thing.

“Your name will go further than you will.”

No, Mother was not saying I would not amount to anything – quite the opposite. She was saying that whatever I say and do will travel further and affect more people than I ever thought it would. This is another way of saying, “your reputation precedes you.” Our words and actions do not stay in the bubble in which we live.

Your firm gets referrals based on this principle. Think about your firm’s best partners. Their names may be tossed out in law firms

across the country based on a result they achieved in a case (or consistently achieve in an area of the law). Those making the referral probably know very little about the specifics of the win, but for some reason, they remember that this attorney is known as a good lawyer and one you want on your team.

In the legal world, your reputation is critical to your success. You must carefully build, protect and preserve your identity as a lawyer who provides quality service and adds value to any case. The saying has special meaning in the context of law firms, and you should also remember that "your firm's name will go further than you will" as well. When you join a firm, you take on that firm's identity, and you should protect it like your own. Everybody has a few stories in their pocket about "that lawyer from ABC firm." No one wants to be that guy or gal. Remember, your choices will outlast you and will shape your legal legacy. Make it a good one.

Mother surely has been right about a lot of things.

C. Meade Hartfield
Lightfoot, Franklin & White, L.L.C.
Birmingham, Alabama.
mhartfield@lightfootlaw.com

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