

Graham Grady

Real Estate Attorney Devoted to Community Empowerment

by Dustin J. Seibert

Following the fallout that resulted in Ferguson, Mo., from the shooting death of Michael Brown by a police officer, Graham C. Grady was motivated to write a cogent letter to the editor to the *Chicago Tribune*.

The letter, from a black man geographically and socioeconomically far removed from the madness in Ferguson, offers a perspective on the racial tension and meaning behind it.

It's not a message you'd expect from a real estate and government transactional attorney. But to understand Grady's success in law is to also recognize his deep-seeded connection to Chicago's underprivileged communities.

A partner at **Taft Stettinius & Hollister LLP**, Grady spent 31 years building and cultivating relationships through both his legal work and an undying sense of civic responsibility that has governed his life

outside of the office.

"I find it irresistible," he says. "I care about the community, and I think we all have an obligation to try and help strengthen the communities we come from. I don't do it out of a sense of obligation but a sense of joy."

Grady grew up on Chicago's South Side, the second child of Leonard and Mary, who together ran a small fuel oil business that they operated out of the family's house. He attended Von Steuben Metropolitan High School on the Northwest Side, a racially diverse school that exposed him at a young age to different types of teachers and students.

"It provided me with a leg up for when I would go to college," he says. "So many of my African-American peers had only been in fully homogenous environments in their neighborhoods and high schools. Going to

college is not a good time to have your first exposure to Caucasians, Jews, Arabs, new immigrants and a whole range of people I encountered in high school."

Though there were no attorneys in his family, Grady knew he wanted to become one since age 8 — partly due to a fascination with Perry Mason, and partly "because lawyers occupied a position of respectability in the community," he says.

"The lawyers I was exposed to through family friends were well regarded," he says. "When you said their names, people would say, 'That's a good guy, a helpful guy, a smart guy who could help you with any number of things.' I liked the sound of that and wanted to grow up to be like that."

Grady was also inspired by the prominent black attorneys he saw influencing the civil

(Continued on page 60)



(Continued from page 58)

rights movement in his formative years.

"I knew I'd never achieve the greatness of a Thurgood Marshall, but how could you not know what he'd accomplished?" he says.

He became a speech communication major at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana because he valued the importance of the spoken word — something he carries with him to this day.

"In terms of the evolution of society and development of our cultures, they've all been influenced by great speeches along the way," he says. "Be it Winston Churchill, be it Caesar, Lincoln, King, Mahatma Gandhi or Indira Gandhi. The power of the spoken word cannot be minimized. It's how we form our impressions of politicians and base a lot of our decisions on who we'll vote for."

Finding His Professional Path

When Grady enrolled in Northwestern University School of Law, he was certain he wanted to be a litigator "for all the style point reasons," he says. His first job after graduation was as an assistant state's attorney for the Cook County State's Attorney's Office. There, he learned that the somewhat romanticized litigation he watched on Perry Mason was a bit different than reality.

"I discovered that there are litigators who rarely or never go to court," he says. "They spend their time with motions, discovery and briefing. Many, if not most cases are settled, which is not a bad thing, but a lot of people that called themselves litigators probably actually tried less than one case a year."

"Fighting over facts and trying to influence the judge regarding the meaning of documentation, testimony or financial records regarding things that happened two to five years ago is a turnoff. It held no allure for me."

While his three years with the state's attorney helped Grady gain experience from trying cases and developing confidence in the courtroom, he also learned that he wasn't a "hang-'em-high" prosecutor at heart.

"There were days I realized I'd be much more comfortable as a public defender," he says. "I'd see who many of these people are... young kids from difficult personal family situations in low-income communities with poor role models and very weak education systems. In some cases, it was no surprise they broke the law, and it doesn't necessarily mean they're bad people, just that they're from bad situations."

When Harold Washington, Chicago's first black mayor, was in office in the early 1980s, he put forth an initiative to recruit young black professionals into local government positions in the interest of "moving the city forward by

getting African-Americans involved in high levels of government," Grady says.

Grady was hired to direct the Private Industry Council, a volunteer board of directors based out of the Office of Employment & Training. He assisted in allocating funds from the Reagan Administration's Job Training Partnership Act of 1982 on a workforce development program and support services for underprivileged individuals preparing to start a new job, among other things.

"I was so happy in that position because I went from one day locking up poor black kids without a future to the next day helping those kids get their GED, job training and back on track with their lives," Grady says. "It was a very heartwarming, value-added job that made me feel good."

A Public to Private Transition

Following the death of Harold Washington in 1987, Grady was faced with a career crisis of sorts.

"When Harold died, a bit of the dream died with him," he says. "I'd just turned 30, and I knew I needed to figure out what I really wanted to do with myself. I figured if I don't

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start practicing law now, I may never do it."

He was prepared to move to southern California to live out his dream of being near the beach and exposed to nearly constant sunshine, having lined up a job at a Los Angeles law firm. But he ultimately chose to stay in local government after realizing that he didn't want to be far from his family.

"The romantic part in me wanted to leave, but the family person and practical person wanted to stay," he says. "Plus, I've always been a believer in government. It's an important tool to provide services for the effective function of society."

Grady proceeded to hold the top spot in a number of other city offices, including the Department of Economic Development, the Department of Buildings, the Chicago Housing Authority and the Department of Zoning, which he ran for five years. He appreciated that those positions allowed him to get paid to improve underserved Chicago neighborhoods.

"I loved the interface between the public and the government and the ability to control the destiny of the community," he says. "Plus, I learned many of the skills I now utilize with my private clients."

His decision to finally move to "the other side of the desk" — seeking government entitlements on behalf of property owners and developers instead of approving and denying them — sent him to Mayer Brown in the mid-1990s, where he was for eight years. He then moved to K&L Gates LLP, where he became an equity partner and stayed for a little more than a decade.

Grady joined Taft in 2012 as a result of wanting to expand his base of colleagues focused on zoning and land use.

"At K&L Gates, there were only two of us," he says. "I did the city work, and he did all the suburban work. We have a much bigger department here, with a lot of synergy that helps us get more clients and more business."

His current client base is broad and multifaceted. Grady seeks government entitlements on behalf of national grocery store chains, residential developers, industrial use commercial office buildings and local charter schools and others.

Among his favorite current clients is the Laborers' and Retirement Board Employees' Annuity and Benefit Fund of Chicago, one of the city's five public pension funds.

"Any given month, we have between five and 10 lawyers working on fund management agreements, pension funds being invested, to contracts, litigation and tax issues," he says. "I love that because I'm like their general counsel and I get to see everything about the operation."

Dan Alexander worked with Grady to develop a number of Chicago charter schools — including several in the Noble Network — in his position as senior project manager of nonprofit real estate company IFF. He still works with Grady in his current capacity as chief operating officer of Northwestern University Settlement Association.

"Graham has a true gift of problem solving, thinking outside the box and getting to the heart of issues," Alexander says. "No matter the problem, he always seems to find a solution. We've accomplished things that we couldn't have without him."

Grady's Untold Civic Passions

Grady's day-job responsibilities keep him working long hours, but his commitment to civic activities outside of work make for even longer days and minimum six-day work weeks.

"I'm always working crazy hours," he says. "But I do it to myself, and I don't mind."

Grady has been civic minded ever since he was in college, where he was active in student government and served as a student member of the University of Illinois board of trustees. He was also a treasurer of the student bar association in law school.

(Continued on page 194)

GRADY

(Continued from page 60)

To this day, he is consistently engaged in a number of organizations designed to enrich Chicago. They include the Cook County Board of Commissioners, where he works on economic development initiatives; and the board of directors for the Lloyd Fry Foundation, an organization that supports programs that improve conditions for low-income, underserved communities in Chicago.

Grady is a founder of the African American Legacy, a compendium of volunteers who raise money and receive funding from the Chicago Community Trust to go toward education, after-school and mentorship programs designed to target socioeconomically blighted Chicago communities.

“Some of my partners might say I’m too civically involved,” Grady adds. “But it’s part of my DNA and what I enjoy. It’d be hard to imagine just being a lawyer, representing clients and billing hours every day and then going home and watching TV. That wouldn’t be me...I have to find ways to help.”

“In some ways, it helps with my practice because I get referrals and the inside scoop on things going on by virtue of maintaining connections outside of the firm.”

Scott McCue recalls how Grady’s connections were beneficial during their time as colleagues at Mayer Brown. McCue, who represented nonprofit Lawrence Hall Youth Services for many years, had a tough time obtaining funding for the client before Grady talked him into speaking to the Court of Claims.

Grady obtained all the necessary money, prompting Lawrence Hall to ask McCue if Grady could take over the account. They became good friends as a result, and McCue eventually recruited Grady to the board of the Lloyd Fry Foundation.

“Graham is a wonderful lawyer and has great human empathy, but he’s also perfectly willing to shake things up,” McCue says. “He has a perspective that’s a little different from all the old white guys that were originally on the board. He’s done a very good job at making us reexamine why we do what we do. He has a great ability to ask the hard questions so nicely you’re never offended, and I suspect he does the same thing in court.”

Nat Wilburn, head of schools for Sacred Heart Schools, was originally hired as a principal for Hardey Preparatory for Boys through a board process on which Grady served. Grady also obtained zoning and land use approvals for large building additions to the school.

Wilburn says that, on top of being a great father to daughters who attended the Academy of the Sacred Heart for Girls, Grady has a love for civic work that never comes off as disingenuous.

“He’s not doing this to check a box — it’s part of who Graham is,” Wilburn says. “You can tell it’s not artificial or for presentation. It

comes so naturally to him, which is why it’s so easy to deal with him as a colleague.”

Passing Down Knowledge

About once a year or so, Grady teaches classes on zoning issues, government entitlements and public finance at Roosevelt University, Northwestern University School of Law and Illinois Institute of Technology.

“I always enjoy it because invariably we get in a good dialogue about issues of the day,” he says. “And I always enjoy the questions from students. Maybe I’ll consider doing it more when I get much older.”

Among the nuggets of wisdom Grady likes to convey to his students is to always have as complete an understanding of the client’s issue as possible. Obtaining the value-added information necessary for client success comes from spending time with them in person or on the phone in order to understand not just their specific need, but also the context behind that need, he says.

“I like to try to put myself on the other end of the phone line and ask myself what is really driving my client,” he says. “I ask a lot of questions, even beyond things I really need to know, to get the job done.”

“The more you understand the challenges your client is facing, the better job you can do for them and the better relationship you can develop with them, because it becomes more personal.” ■