

A Different Kind of Practice

November 17, 2009



To hear Henry Frye tell it, North Carolina's first African-American Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and first African-American state lawmaker elected since the 19th century might just as easily have been a dentist.

After leaving the U.S. Air Force in 1955, Henry Frye went to Chapel Hill to meet with an official from the University of North Carolina dental school. Having graduated from N.C. A&T University in 1953, Frye was still searching for a long-term career, and dentistry seemed as good an option as any. "But he was not very encouraging," Frye said of the official he met. "I left feeling very disheartened."

Frye's short-term disappointment would become North Carolina's long-term gain. His dental ambitions thwarted, Frye was persuaded to apply to UNC-Chapel Hill's School of Law. He graduated with honors in 1959, embarking on one of the most storied legal careers in North Carolina history. Frye would go on to serve as the first African-American lawmaker in the modern history of the state legislature, an assistant U.S. attorney, a professor of law at N.C. Central University and Chief Justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court.

One can modestly say that Frye brings a wealth of experience to his practice at Brooks Pierce. With a rich background in public policy, he serves as an unparalleled resource for clients and fellow attorneys facing arbitration, mediation or cases before appellate courts.

Frye has a particular passion for reviewing appellate briefs and preparing attorneys for oral arguments. "Go to the heart of the case!" Frye counsels. "There are moments when you have to drop all the legalese and say to a judge, in plain English, 'This right here is what the case is all about!'"

The candor among colleagues at Brooks Pierce is one of the things Frye values most about the firm. Between mentoring fellow lawyers and teaching a class entitled "Justice" at N.C. A&T University, Frye has ample opportunity to share a lifetime of hard-won wisdom about law and public policy.

As for the lost dream of dentistry? "I cannot imagine waking up and going to work on people's mouths every day," Frye said, before adding wryly, "But my dentist doesn't find that as ironic as I do."