

GARY VAUSE: A PERSPECTIVE

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In the spring of 1975, W. Gary Vause was in private practice in Connecticut with his law partner, Thomas Sullivan.¹ They had a successful law practice specializing in public-sector labor law.² He had represented school districts in labor arbitrations and collective bargaining since before he graduated from law school and had become quite skilled in the practice. Nevertheless, he had grown weary of the northeastern winters and was considering moving back to his home state of Florida. As a result, he decided to visit his pregnant sister, Suzanne, who was living in Tampa at the time.

During the visit, Suzanne took Gary on a tour of the Tampa Bay area. As they drove by Stetson University College of Law, Gary asked her whether she would mind if he went in to see if he could get a word with the Dean. By that time, Gary had taught several classes as an adjunct professor at the University of Connecticut and was considering teaching as a profession. Gary entered the Dean's office wearing just jeans and a collared shirt, and yet somehow managed to get an audience with Dean Richard T. Dillon. Obviously, the meeting went well for both Gary and Stetson, for he was soon offered a position as Assistant Dean and a member of the faculty, which he gladly accepted. So began his twenty-eight year love affair with Stetson.

Suzanne, my mother, was pregnant with me at the time. As a result, my only memories of Gary are those in which he was associated with the school in some fashion, either as a Professor, Assistant or Associate Dean, and eventually as Dean and University Vice President. His commitment to the betterment of the school and the education of capable lawyers was truly remarkable. I am

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1. Thomas Sullivan, *A Best Friend Recalled*, 33 Stetson L. Rev. 83 (2003).

2. The law firm is still in existence today as Sullivan, Schoen, Campana & Cannon, L.L.C. in Hartford, Connecticut.

lucky enough to be one of those lawyers, but even luckier to know him as my uncle and mentor. As I look back on my experiences with Gary, I consider myself truly privileged to have known him in both his professional capacity as a professor and administrator and in his personal life as patriarch of my family. The only other individual I know of who was able to see these wonderful contrasting sides of him was his late daughter, GariAnn, also a Stetson graduate.³

I am often asked why I became an attorney, or more specifically, why I chose the area of law I practice. The answer is always easy for me—my Uncle Gary. He served a dual role for me, first as an inspiration as I was growing up and then as mentor as I entered the legal profession. When I was young, his subtle inquiries about my grades and ambitions were more effective than he ever imagined. He was always the one to encourage me to explore alternative professional careers, whether in the military or in business, although I now realize that his underlying theme was always for me to be a leader in whatever field I chose. Yet, as tempting as he made those other careers sound, there really was no other option than to become a “labor lawyer” like him.

Once it was apparent that I had chosen the legal profession, Gary never directly tried to influence me to come to Stetson. My desire to leave Tallahassee, and the opportunity to be closer to him and gain his valuable insight during my legal education left me with only one alternative. Once I entered law school, Gary and I never discussed how we would handle the fact that I was his nephew; it was basically an unspoken agreement that no one would know. I guess we both figured this would be the best way to avoid any potential conflict issues. This mutual agreement lasted until the day of graduation, when the commencement ceremony included an announcement that I would be receiving my diploma from my uncle—a complete surprise to me. I think he got more of a kick out of surprising my former professors than he did me.

Looking back on what now seems like my brief law school career, I realize one of the most important things Gary taught me was to recognize the difference between the intellectual side of law and the actual practice of law. He continually insisted that I obtain the ability to function productively, almost immediately

3. GariAnn graduated from Stetson University College of Law in December 1990.

after graduation. He stated that it was important for Stetson to have a reputation as a school that produced capable lawyers, who graduated, passed the bar, and made an immediate impact on society. It was this practical approach to the education of young lawyers that distinguished him from most academicians. He felt that so many schools produced students trained in theory and not in practice. As a result, he encouraged me to participate in a variety of clerking and internship opportunities. This was possibly the most beneficial bit of wisdom Gary imparted to me during law school. The practical work experience and personal relationships I forged during these experiences have played a large role in the success I have achieved in my career to date.

To Gary, legal education was an investment in one's future. He felt an obligation to graduates to increase their degree's worth by increasing the reputation of the law school. He was always concerned about the school's reputation and the opinion of lawyers who were looking to hire Stetson graduates. He knew that the best way to increase the school's reputation was to increase the perception of the type of graduates the school produced.

His assertion that new graduates should always have the ability to practice was more than just rhetoric. Gary continued his private practice by conducting labor arbitrations throughout his tenure at Stetson, until he was forced to give it up due to time constraints when he became Dean in 1999. I frequently meet lawyers who presented cases before him at arbitration and have nothing but the deepest respect for his ability as a neutral. His attentiveness to the ever-changing areas of labor and employment law and his ability to get to the truth of the matter was something both labor and management sides had no choice but to respect. This made Gary one of the most sought-after arbitrators in the country.

It was not until I began my professional career that I realized one of Gary's greatest attributes was his ability to manage people and issues in difficult situations. It was this ability that enabled him to accomplish many of the wonderful things he was able to do within such a short period of time as Dean. Of course, his proudest achievement was the establishment of the Tampa Law Center and Campus and part-time program—his "baby" as he often referred to it. There was so much work involved in maneuvering the various interests to get this accomplished that I lost track half-way through the process. However, I knew that he wanted it

done, and as a result I had no doubt that it would be accomplished. It was his ability to deal with difficult situations, stay focused on the big picture, and avoid getting bogged down in ancillary issues that made him such a capable administrator and leader of the school. I analogize his ability to that of a CEO of a major corporation, and I have little doubt that he would have been just as successful in that capacity.

Anyone who worked closely with Gary knew that his success was due in large part to his ability to put in long hours to get things accomplished. His work ethic can be traced directly back to his father, Willie Vause. My grandfather was something of a depression-era entrepreneur. He spent most of his time working in the dangerous and difficult lumber industry of north Florida and south Georgia. He was also a builder, a dabbler in the apiary business, and a restaurateur (a partnership with Gary); he spent his twilight years in the shrimping industry. He was a big strong man with a head full of white hair and skin as tough as leather. He was the type of man who was always on the move and did not stop working until his head hit the pillow. As with many of his contemporaries who grew up during the Depression, Willie knew no other way of life but to work hard.

During that era, men could not afford to spend their time getting an education because they had to support their families, but he certainly knew the value of an education and constantly stressed it to Gary. He had Gary working in the lumber mill at a very young age, catching planks of wood off of a conveyor belt. It was repetitive, hard work that demanded attention. Gary recollected his father's warnings that, if he did not get an education, he would be working in the lumber mill for the rest of his life. It was these warnings that motivated him to work hard toward obtaining an education. Gary told me this story as we were repairing a barbed wire fence during a particularly cold winter day in Tallahassee. In his typical, subtle fashion, Gary made the inference clear.

Because Gary obtained his work ethic and determination from his father, it leaves little doubt that he acquired his compassion and patience from his mother, Lila Vause. My grandmother, a beautiful southern belle from Tallahassee, was a kind and gentle person who possessed the same subtle and persuasive qualities that Gary was known for throughout his professional career. Gary was lucky enough to take these attributes from her and

combine them with the hard work ethic and determination of his father. The result was Gary's drive to succeed at everything he did, but at the same time maintain the ability to patiently seek long-term goals and remain compassionate about such things as helping underprivileged foreign students pursue a career in the United States. These attributes were also instrumental in his ability to be a successful administrator, manager, and arbitrator.

I know Gary's death has been hard on so many of the people whose lives he touched because it seemed to be so very sudden. He was working practically up to the very day he passed away, all the time knowing that his time was near, but never indicating to anyone that he was in the least bit uncomfortable. In February, I came down to St. Petersburg to visit him. It was the first time I had seen him since Christmas. It was readily apparent to me that his health had taken a dramatic turn for the worse, but we never had a chance to discuss in detail exactly what that meant. Though I had known for some time that he had been battling cancer, I, as well as my entire family, assumed that Gary would be able to beat the disease because we had always viewed him as invincible. But, during that February visit, I saw for the first time a vulnerability that had never been present before.

After the visit, he called me in Atlanta and informed me that, due to his health, he was going to have to cancel his plans to spend the coming summer in Brazil. That was all that needed to be said. Like his father, who had died of pancreatic cancer in November 1994, Gary would not allow his health to hinder him from accomplishing his goals. Despite the fact that he knew his body was soon to be overcome, he was never one to burden others with what he considered unnecessary worries, so he continued his work as Dean. This was so typical of him, not to want any sympathy or special treatment.

In April, I came down and stayed with him for several days. He was very sick, and it was extremely difficult to see him in that condition. Nevertheless, he would not let his condition affect our time together. He wanted me to be assured that he was comfortable with his fate. As we sat and talked, the conversation soon turned to a brief chronology of the events in his life. He loved to tell stories of his childhood growing up in Tallahassee with his good friend, William Meggs. He discussed how he had convinced William that they would join the Marines together and then, after William signed up, Gary changed his mind and went the "easier"

route with the Air Force—a story that I had heard countless times.⁴ He recalled the hard training he went through and his work in military intelligence in Japan listening to North Korean fighter pilots. And as I sat and listened, it dawned on me that he knew he had accomplished more than he ever anticipated in life.

I have heard many people state that Gary lived a “full life.” What I think is more appropriate is what my good friend and classmate, Chris Johnston, said after learning of his passing. Chris, who constantly amused Gary with his numerous exploits, said, “You know, Gary packed the equivalent of five lifetimes into sixty years. I hope I can do just half of that.” Indeed, Gary himself was confident in the fact that he lived his life to the fullest and committed himself completely to all his endeavors. As a result of this realization, he was content with his fate.

It is very difficult for me to adequately express what Gary meant to my small family. He was more than an uncle to my brother Daniel and me, and more than a brother to my mother and his brother Bobby. He was a source of pride and accomplishment. Everyone who knew Gary has lost something special, whether it be a good friend, mentor, colleague, professor, or trusted advisor. Fortunately, we all have our memories and should feel extremely lucky that we were able to be touched by such a unique individual.

As I know we must all pass on eventually, I, for selfish reasons, was not ready for Gary’s death. I always assumed, or I guess imagined, that Gary would be there to help guide me through my professional endeavors. To date, I am beginning my fifth year of practicing law and, as Gary recently said to me, I no longer need any guidance on the law, but guidance on how to successfully navigate the world using what I know. He was my compass. But, now that he is gone, I realize that he was sure to point me in the right direction and expected me to make my way. I have a feeling that there are many young lawyers just like me that he pointed in that direction. Thank you, Uncle Gary, for showing us the way.

4. William Meggs also chose the legal profession and currently serves as the State Attorney in Tallahassee. Amazingly, they remained very close friends despite this incident.