

Mark Merritt Receives McKnight Award

Mark Merritt, the 2012 recipient of the H. Brent McKnight Renaissance Lawyer Award, knew the man for whom the award is named very well. They both grew up in Charlotte, went to the same high school, were both Morehead Scholars, and worked together on the Mecklenburg County Courthouse construction project and various Legal Service of Southern Piedmont endeavors.

“He was a few years ahead of me,” Merritt said, “but when I was at Myers Park, Brent was the standard when counselors talked about who you wanted to emulate as a student and as a student leader. He was an extraordinary individual at a very young age.”

Years later, Merritt even tried a case before Judge McKnight.

“He hammered me,” Merritt said. “That’s part of what we do.”

McKnight, who died in 2004 while serving on the U.S. District Court for the Western District of North Carolina, was a former chair of the Professionalism Committee, which established the award in his honor in 2006 “to recognize those North Carolina attorneys whose trustworthiness, respectful and courteous treatment of all people, enthusiasm for intellectual achievement and commitment to excellence in work, and service to the profession and community, inspire others.”

Merritt certainly fits the criteria.

“In terms of professionalism, I treat my adversary and parties in the court with respect,” said Merritt. “I think we owe that to each other. I think the court system works best when people work hard on behalf of their clients but do so in a way that is respectful and considerate of the rights of others.”

“I have been involved in commercial litigation for almost 30 years, and things are not always as black and white as our clients would like them to be. Lawyers bring objectivity and judgment to the process to help others solve problems. I view the role of lawyers as helping people solve problems, hopefully to your client’s best advantage.”

Perhaps the best example of Merritt’s professionalism is provided by law partner Julian Wright, who nominated him for the



Mark Merritt is pictured at the N.C. Bar Center where he is a frequent speaker.

McKnight Award. The story revolves around Wright’s representation early in his career of a death row inmate who decided to end his appeals and be put to death.

“My client and my client’s family beseeched my participation as an observer to the execution,” Wright said. “The trial judge who found my client competent to forego his appeals also ordered my presence at Central Prison that night in the event my client changed his mind and wanted his final Motion for Appropriate Relief to be considered after all.”

“The day before I was to travel for a final set of last-minute hearings and arrive at Central Prison in the early evening prior to a 2 a.m. execution time, Mark came to my office to tell me that he would be at Central Prison that night as well. Although he said he was confident that I did not need his assistance that evening as a lawyer, he wanted to make sure that I had a support network at the same time I was trying to provide support to my client and his family.”

“Mark Merritt stayed with me all through that long tortured evening just to be a friend, a supporter, and an example of what good lawyers and good people should be doing.”

Merritt is a 1979 graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a 1982 graduate of the University of Virginia School of Law. He practices with Robinson, Bradshaw & Hinson in Charlotte, and is a past-president of the Mecklenburg County Bar.

Merritt has served as a State Bar councilor since 2006, and has also served as vice chair and chair of the Ethics Committee.

"I enjoy working on the Ethics Committee," Merritt said. "We have a really challenging role. North Carolina has been at the forefront of a lot of ethical issues, on the cutting edge, such as outsourcing to places like India, the use of the Internet to advertise, and the use of cloud computing. I think because North Carolina is a very tech-savvy state that we have been in on the mix of some very important decisions.

"The committee is a very large committee — 33 members. My friend Jerry Parnell calls it the last great debating society. The staff of the State Bar and people like Alice Mine, they all work hard, and I think we do a good job. We are not afraid to re-examine issues and try to get it right."

Merritt draws inspiration from working with the Lawyers Assistance Program, which he has chaired the past three years.

"This is a great program that does an extraordinary job with a dedicated group of volunteers helping lawyers in North Carolina

who have had a problem with mental health and substance abuse issues," Merritt said. "It has been very rewarding, and I have met a lot of great lawyers in that program who are in recovery and are doing extraordinarily well. I am inspired by what they have accomplished."

Merritt is currently involved with fundraising efforts associated with the new State Bar headquarters.

"We're making great progress. One of the things I have really liked about the State Bar is that you lawyers from all of the state when you meet with 55 bar counselors. Every part of the state is represented, so you almost feel like you can go in any county courthouse in the state and know somebody there."

In spite of his commitments to the State Bar and the Mecklenburg County Bar, Merritt has always maintained a strong presence within the NCBA, including the Antitrust & Trade Regulation Law Section, which he chaired in 2005-06.

"That is one great group of lawyers," Merritt said. "The Antitrust & Trade Regulation Law Section has been an invaluable source of relationships and friendships over the years. I think I was a member of the section the first year it came into existence and have always been active in that group.

"They do great work." *AVL*

Congratulations Mark W. Merritt and Thomas P. Holderness



Mark W. Merritt

H. Brent McKnight Renaissance
Lawyer Award Recipient



Thomas P. Holderness

William L. Thorp Pro Bono
Award Recipient

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U.S. Solicitor General Donald B. Verrilli, this year's Willis Smith/Willis Smith Jr. Ethics and Professionalism speaker, donated his honorarium to Legal Aid of North Carolina. Joining in the presentation at the NCBA Annual Meeting were, from left, NCBA Executive Director Allan Head, Walter Dellinger, the Douglas B. Maggs Professor of Law at Duke University who also participated in the program, Verrilli, and LANC Executive Director George Hausen.