



Anthony P. Griffin: On Being a Civil Rights Attorney in a Conservative Climate

[by Teresa Talerico]

Civil rights lawyer Anthony P. Griffin has handled his share of controversial and high-profile cases--from successfully challenging prayer at public school football games in a case that went to the U.S. Supreme Court to protecting the First Amendment rights of a Ku Klux Klan grand dragon after authorities ordered the Klansman to produce a membership list.

A graduate of the University of Houston's law school, Mr. Griffin has maintained his practice in Galveston, TX, since 1978. He is currently involved in the fight against a Texas congressional redistricting plan that could weaken the voting power of minorities.

Q: Your work focuses on First Amendment issues and racial and religious discrimination. What's your advice for those interested in hanging their shingle as civil rights lawyers?

A: The first advice would be persistence. That means the tenor of the society changes. Sometimes people are more receptive, or the legal system is more receptive, to certain types of clients. You also have to be consistent. If you don't have a core belief system in terms of trying to make the law right, then you will stop. The hostility, society saying you're doing the wrong thing, the adverse decisions that you'll see around the country... you'll start believing that it's really not worth it and you might as well just concentrate on personal injury or some other area of law.

Q: What is your core belief system?

A: Being an African-American male, being raised by a mom who had the responsibility of seven kids, you tended to understand the importance of civil rights laws. Growing up in the '60s and '70s also emphasized that it was a fight worth fighting. Being told to shut up in school and not being given the same type of consideration as your fellow students, even though you grew up in the age of integration, you understood the importance of education, the First Amendment, equal protection,

due process. You understood how hollow the Constitution really was, and when you said the Pledge of Allegiance, how hollow it was unless folks like yourself continued to fight.

Q: In the Santa Fe (Texas) Independent School District case, what strategies did you use in taking on school prayer in a conservative community?

A: Survival. Survival to the degree that you recognize religion is probably one of the most emotionally charged areas you could get involved in. You exist in a society where religion and beliefs are fundamental and important, but you also recognize that most people of certain faiths don't believe in giving the rights of faith to other folks. They're talking about Christianity; they're not talking about other faiths.

Q: In representing Klansman Michael Lowe, how did you separate your feelings about him from your ability to do the job? (The ACLU appointed Griffin to Lowe's case in 1993.)

A: I treated it like I would treat a criminal defense case and like I treat a majority of my cases. It doesn't necessarily mean I'm going to take my client home to dinner with me or that they are, or will become, my best friend. My client represented an issue. He, like most clients, understood that race, sex, money, background had nothing to do with him needing help as a client. He was a client in the strictest sense of the word. How I thought about him really wasn't an issue. We did cut some deals. I didn't want any protesting around the courthouse when we were in

court. I told him...keep your boys away. I had an internal deal with myself that there would be no hugging. I didn't want to see in any newspaper Anthony Griffin and the Klansman hugging. The other deal was I didn't want to talk about race and politics with him unless it related to the case.

Q: What would you say to new attorneys dealing with clients whose views are radically different?

A: Don't be shocked. The next case they have, somebody else will shock them with something even greater. Once they get to that point where they understand that that's the role of a lawyer, they can smile at themselves and say I'm doing my job and feel good about it.

Q: You recently said you're fighting against mass indoctrination and a conservative, religious bent. Can you elaborate on that?

A: It's the fight that's going on around the country. Whether you're Democratic or Republican, there are some fundamental issues we don't fight for that we really are setting ourselves up for failure in this country. What happens is when you walk into the courtroom, a lot of times you really are fighting against this whole ideology.

Q: What are you most proud of?

A: My first civil rights case was my mother's case. It was equal work for equal pay: Georgia Wright Hill vs. J.C. Penney. She was being paid less than her male counterpart even



though they were doing the same work.

Q: What's one thing they don't teach in law school that they should?

A: Office procedure. Bills. They should have a psychology course in law school. They should probably have a stress-relief course. By stress relief, I mean we all have addictions. That addiction may be cigarettes, Coca-Cola, sex, drugs. By mandating that they take those types of courses, it will help to control their addictions. In essence, what you're asking (lawyers) to do is to take on other folks' problems and not be affected. And that's impossible. The law school curriculums need to develop coursework that deals with those issues and incorporates interpersonal relationships, families, and those types of things so that the lawyer can at least come out understanding some degree of how to be effective at what they do for a living.