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Remembering James W. Wray

Jim Wray died on February 13, 2014, just two weeks shy of his 92nd birthday.

I met Jim shortly after I arrived in Corpus Christi in the mid-1970's to begin my law career and really got to know him during his tenure as a Director of the State Bar Board of Directors later that decade. I was then a leader of a band of young Chicano lawyers in South Texas who had organized to serve the Spanish-speaking community of Texas through the legal system. I was also on the Board of Directors of the Nueces County Bar Association; Jim had previously served as President of the Bar.

In 1979, the State Bar of Texas, along with other State agencies, was up for sunset review before the Legislature. The Legislature had previously passed "sunset review" legislation that required most State agencies to justify their existence as a State agency, and, if an agency failed to do so, the agency would be abolished or would be allowed to continue but without the imprimatur of the State. The Bar had become concerned that if it lost its status as a State agency, it would lose its hold on all Texas lawyers through mandatory membership in the State Bar as required by law, and that it would morph into a smaller and weaker association if membership were voluntary. To assure its continued existence as a State agency, the State Bar needed the support of lawyers, bar associations and the public. The State Bar needed everyone's help.

In 1978-79, I was President of the Chicano Bar Association of South Texas, Inc. CBAST was organized in 1977 to provide a voice and an action group to address the needs of the Mexican-American people in Texas. Most of us were recent law school graduates who had been members of Chicano Law student associations in law schools in Texas and elsewhere. As lawyers, we now wanted to focus on issues of concern to the people: fair and equal access to the courts; equal educational opportunity through the public school system, colleges and graduate schools; voting and equal representation; immigration reform; farmworkers rights; police brutality; and many others. As a regional organization, we met in different cities to accommodate the membership.

During my presidency, Jim expressed to me an interest in attending one of our meetings to talk to us in his capacity as a State Bar Director. I told Jim I would add him to our agenda at our next meeting, which was to be in Alice. Jim said he would attend, and he did. Before I called the meeting to order, Jim met and talked to most, if not all, of the attending members. He also told me that he wanted to hear what our concerns were and that he would prefer to talk to us after we had taken care of our business. Obviously, he wanted to know what we were about, and he

District Judge, 105th Judicial District Court for Kenedy, Kleberg and Nueces Counties, Texas, 1987-2010
Presiding Judge, Fifth Administrative Judicial Region of Texas, 2007-2011

did. He listened. When he finally talked to us, he stated that, in his opinion, the State Bar was generally supportive of our concerns and that he would be glad to carry our concerns to the State Board. Naturally, we were surprised –and overwhelmed– by his message, and we accepted his offer. He then told us the purpose of his visit. He wanted our support for continuation of the State Bar of Texas as a State agency. We then engaged in a lively discussion on how we could accomplish our respective goals. At the end of the day, we agreed to support the State Bar, and he agreed to push our newly hatched proposal to establish a section within the State Bar that would address and act on issues specifically affecting the Mexican-American community of Texas.

With Jim’s help, we prepared our written proposal to the State Bar Board of Directors. Jim laid the groundwork for us and eventually got us on the State Bar’s agenda at its meeting in Austin. The Legislature was then in session. He accepted, with a smile (or was it a smirk?), my suggestion that we invite to the Board meeting every Mexican-American legislator to the meeting. The legislators joined our members attending the meeting. I presented our proposal to the Board. As I closed my remarks, I told the Board that we proposed that the new section would have the name of “The Section on the Concerns of the Spanish-speaking Community of Texas.” I recognized that that was a long name for a section of the Bar, but I assured the Board that, before long, the Section would most likely be known as “the James Wray Section of the State Bar of Texas.” Well, that comment got the response that I wanted. After the presentation, the Board went into closed session. We were not privy, of course, to what was said or done in closed session, but, according to Jim, the public vote of the Board was unanimous approval. Ours was the first State Bar Section established not just on a particular area of the law, but one that would focus on social as well as legal issues affecting a significant portion of the people of the State.

Jim did not stop there. He continued to serve as the State Bar’s liaison to our Section. As the Chair of the planning committee, I asked Jim to participate in the planning of our first meeting at the Annual Meeting of the Bar in San Antonio in 1979. He did not hesitate to do so. He agreed with us that we needed to have a great showing at the Annual Meeting to impress upon the Bar leadership our commitment to the Bar. He even joined a core group of us –Jose R. Rodriguez (the first President of CBAST, Inc. and now State Senator), Jesus “Chuy” Hinojosa (now State Senator and former State Representative), Eduardo Rodriguez (a future President of the State Bar of Texas), and me– to visit Judge Reynaldo Garza of Brownsville, the first Mexican-American appointed as a United States District Judge and later Judge of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, to ask him to be the principal speaker at our first meeting at the Annual Bar Meeting. Judge Garza agreed. At the Annual Meeting, Jim Wray received the first of many accolades and thanks for his part in establishing the Section.

After the first Annual Meeting, Jim continued to attend our Section meetings. He worked closely with our first Chair, Peter Torres, Jr., during that first critical year. When I was elected Chair of the Section the following year, he continued his commitment to the Section by working with me as the State Bar’s liaison. I know that he continued to “check in” with the Section every now and then to see how things were going.

Through the years, Jim Wray maintained close ties to and affection for the Section. He stepped forward to help when no one else had before. He stood up for us when no one from the State Bar Board had done so before. He spoke for us when no one else would. He was there for us whenever we called on him. If ever a Section of the State Bar were to be named for a person, without question, as I said in 1979, this Section would be known as the “James Wray Section of the State Bar of Texas.”

One final note. I had the privilege –and the pleasure– of presiding over one of Jim Wray’s last jury trials. He represented a civil defendant in a death case resulting from a two vehicle collision in Kleberg County, Kingsville. He was then 78 years of age. He did not have any partners, associates or paralegals assisting him. It was not an easy, slam down case. The trial took five days. He got a defense verdict.

Jim Wray was not only a good lawyer. He was the conscience of the community. He was a true friend.