

Judge William Benson Bryant

1911-2005

Compassionate and Fair in Life and Law

Judge William B. Bryant was appointed to the U.S. District Court by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965. He had been one of the most prominent criminal defense attorneys in Washington, D.C., and he became one of its most respected federal judges. A student of the Constitution throughout his life, Judge Bryant was known for his compassion and fairness.



Judge Bryant's law clerks at a party celebrating the 50th Anniversary of his appointment to the bench (1975)

William B. Bryant was born in Wetumpka, Alabama, on September 18, 1911. Judge Bryant's family moved to Washington less than one year later, after his grandfather had been driven out of town by a lynch mob. Bryant attended Dunbar High School, Howard University, and its law school where he taught trial advocacy for more than 20 years. Although he loved his work, the judge's wife Astaire and their two children came first, and he often urged his law clerks to leave the office to spend more time with their families.

William B. Bryant was a fixture in the federal courthouse in Washington from the time he began trying cases in 1948 until his death almost six decades later. Barred from the segregated courthouse library during his early years as an attorney, Judge Bryant became the first African-American prosecutor to try cases in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

Appointed to the District Court on August 11, 1965, Judge Bryant became that court's first African-American Chief Judge in 1977.

Judge Bryant was a role model to young lawyers of all races. He believed that the law could always accommodate a fair result, and he spent countless hours studying cases in search of law that would achieve justice. He was always careful to preserve the dignity of those who appeared before him and was the soul of the District Court. An incurable optimist, Judge Bryant bought a new car at the age of 93 so that he could drive himself to work. This optimism drew countless judges and lawyers to his judicial chambers, seeking advice about life and law. His friends would leave a visit with the "old man" (his words) fully understanding the meaning of wisdom and feeling good about their prospects and those of mankind.



Chief Judge William Bryant, U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia; Chief Judge Spottwood Robinson III, U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit; Chief Judge Theodora Newman, Jr., District of Columbia Court of Appeals; Chief Judge N. Carl Mendelsohn, Superior Court of the District of Columbia (1981)

Judge Bryant, Justice Thurgood Marshall, Justice Marshall's wife, Cecilia Marshall, at a party celebrating the 75th Anniversary of Judge Bryant's appointment to the bench (1986)



Judge Bryant and President Jimmy Carter



Judge Bryant and his wife Astaire

