

Give 'Em Hell, *Trumans!*

Official Reprint

A NEWSLETTER OF THE TRUMAN SCHOLARS ASSOCIATION

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SPRING 2000



“The mission of the Truman Scholars Association is to build, maintain and educate a community of Truman Scholars; to foster a life long commitment to public service, in all its forms, through intellectual, personal and professional development, and to support and promote public service.”

“I never give them hell. I just tell the truth and they think it’s hell.”

HARRY S. TRUMAN

Integrating Public Service and a Private Law Practice

By Wendy R. Leibowitz ('80, D.C.)

Nowhere is the mix of public and private service more interesting and intertwined than in the legal world.

Think of “public servant,” and an attorney at a private law firm in Manhattan might not spring to mind. But Brooks R. Burdette (81, Georgia), a partner at the posh New York law firm of Shulte Roth and Zabel spends considerable time assisting non-profits with legal issues, on a pro bono, or volunteer, basis. He fields tax, employment, and trademark queries, as well as issues such as whether someone is likely to go to jail for participating in a protest. “I really love the work,” he said. “There are so many different questions.”

Recently he assisted an organization founded by a Truman Scholar: BrainStorm, the brainchild



Brooks Burdette

of Truman Scholar Maggie Jacobs, ('83, Ohio). BrainStorm provides tutoring services for students in New York. Brooks not only helped them incorporate their organization, but ended up serving on the board.

“I really appreciate that TSA has provided me with an opportunity to help other scholars,” he said.

Born and raised in Hogansville, Georgia, a mill town of 2,000 people between Atlanta and Columbus, Brooks decided he wanted to be a lawyer when he was ten. “It must have been from watching Perry Mason or some attorney on television,” he said. “It couldn’t have been anything else.” His mother is a teacher and his father an accountant who worked at the local textile mill.

(continued on page 2)

(continued from page 1)

Brooks has osteogenesis imperfecta, a rare bone disorder. “I had somewhere in excess of 40 long bone fractures before I was 9, mostly femurs, mostly in my sleep, mostly as a result of muscle spasms,” he recalled. “I was in bed or in a wheelchair from age 2 to age 20. I started attending school on a regular basis when I was 10.”

Brooks attended Wofford College, a small liberal arts college of about 1,000 students in Spartanburg, S.C., graduating in 1982. He went straight to Harvard Law School.

He recalled his first trial as “a real widows and orphans kind of thing.” Brooks’s firm represented the trustee for bondholders who had been defrauded of their retirement savings, losing their investments, which averaged about ten thousand dollars apiece. At the time, it was the largest securities fraud cases in the United States. The case, which settled after three months, resulted in a substantial settlement for the bondholders.

When he went to law school, Brooks seriously considered running for public office. He was set to accept an offer from the prosecutor’s office in Georgia when the office ran out of funds and withdrew the offer. Brooks called the New York firm where he had worked over the summers, Cravath, Swaine & Moore, and accepted their offer. “I dived into private practice. It’s fascinating,” he said.

Early in 1998, Brooks got an invitation from the Truman Scholars Association, inviting him to the gathering at Truman’s Little White House in Key West. He hoped to reconnect there with James Mosteller, his college debating partner. “I helped him with his Truman Scholar application,” Brooks

recalled. At the last minute, James ended up canceling out of the Florida gathering, but Brooks attended, with no regrets. “Going down to Key West and meeting other Truman Scholars was the first time in years that I had spent time thinking about the concept of public service,” Brooks remembered. “Even though I had done some things within my private practice that I considered to be consistent with my commitment as a lawyer to do pro bono work, it was just part of my job. Not until Key West did I start to think again about the concept of public service.”

As to his long-term ambitions, if he could wave a magic wand, he confessed he’d like to become a judge. “But that’s a long shot,” he said. “The people who get appointed to judgeships in our country are highly qualified practitioners who have had the opportunity to meet someone who’s in a position to appoint them. So I have to meet someone to appoint me.”

Wherever he ends up, he said his membership in the Truman Scholars Association will be a meaningful part of his life. “TSA has been an extraordinarily important part of bringing me back to a part of my youthful ambitions that I had considered to be gone,” he said. “The organization has given me an opportunity to meet and interact with people doing public service in all kinds of ways—and to help them out with a few things. That wouldn’t have been available to me otherwise. I think that there are probably a lot of people, particularly scholars from the early years of the Truman program, that, unlike me, would probably greatly appreciate the opportunity to come back to the fold a bit. And TSA is the conduit for doing that.” ★

In Memoriam: Brooks Roy Burdette
October 6, 1961 - May 13, 2009