

## **Robin M. Lewis**

### **Memorial Resolution Dauphin County Bar Association Harrisburg, PA**

**April 6, 2016**

#### *Introduction*

Greetings to the Judges of the Court, to Robin's beloved husband and fellow attorney Claude Lewis, to her niece Brittany Ransom, to friends and former coworkers, and to her colleagues at the Bar.

We come together today to mark the passing of Robin Lewis through our ranks. She was gone -- too soon, on December 21, 2015, at the age of 60 -- after a long period of poor health, and a determination to keep working and doing regardless. She lived a full life. Oliver Wendell Holmes remarked that "many people die with their music still in them...because they are always getting ready to live. Before they know it, time runs out." Robin lived with purpose, and shared her music with all, throughout her life.

She will be remembered as a pioneer in the ranks of women and African American attorneys in Harrisburg. Her legacy will be carried on by those whom she inspired, men as well as women, attorneys of all races, who encountered her in her long and distinguished career as a litigator, supervisor, administrator and mentor at the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, where she served for 23 years.

Robin was a serious, take-charge person, making sure that things at work, at home, at church, among her friends and family, were done and done right. But she was also gregarious and fun. Please let me tell you more about this extraordinary fellow attorney.

#### *Early Life and Education*

Robin was born in Chester, Pennsylvania, the daughter of Dr. John L. Young, a medical doctor, and the late Jeanette Phillips. She was the eldest of six children -- she had four brothers and one sister. Robin

ran the family. Later in life, she became the primary caregiver for her mother, commuting from Harrisburg to Chester to care for her.

Robin graduated from Penncrest High School in Media, PA. She then attended Earlham University in Richmond, Indiana, a liberal arts college founded by Pennsylvania Quakers in the early 1800s. She graduated in 1976 with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Biology. Earlham describes its ideal graduates as "citizens of strong moral character who see the world with broad, inquisitive minds." This would certainly fit Robin. Her biology degree might make one think that she planned to follow in her father's footsteps as a doctor, but those close to her say that she always wanted to be a lawyer. She began law school in Fall of 1976, at The University of Pittsburgh School of Law, and graduated in 1979.

During Robin's first year of law school, she joined the Black American Law Student Association, and was assigned a third year student as a mentor. Her mentor was a United States Marine Corp veteran and a quiet, gentle man who was described by a fellow law student as a "trusted, helpful older brother who gave me confidence that I could make it." Her mentor was Claude Lewis. They kept in touch after he graduated, even when he moved from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg to work as an attorney with the Commonwealth. They started dating the summer before Robin's third year of law school. On their first date, Claude drove from Harrisburg to Chester, Pennsylvania - Robin's home - to take her to a movie in Philadelphia.

This long distance relationship continued and, after Robin graduated from law school, she moved to Harrisburg. Robin and Claude became engaged, and married in 1985. They celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary a few months before her passing. They were well matched, and he supported her in all of her future endeavors and challenges.

### *Work and Life in Harrisburg*

Knowing Robin as a lawyer and leader as many of us do, it is hard to imagine, but worth remembering, that in 1979, Robin had difficulty finding work as an African American woman lawyer in Harrisburg. She worked at Sears for a while. She then worked with Lenora Smith, one of the few African American woman attorneys at the time, in a general

practice that included a few employment matters. Lenora remembers her as assertive and good with clients. Robin was then chosen to be a judicial law clerk to The Honorable Doris Smith-Ribner of the Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court. There she met fellow clerks Rhonda Daviston and Joy Waters Fleming, and formed lifelong friendships with them. Rhonda started with Judge Smith before Robin, but in Robin's view she was the big sister to Rhonda because she was older! After the birth of Rhonda's two children, Sydney and Simeon, Robin became their very involved and dutiful aunt. After a successful clerkship, Robin began her career at the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections.

Robin started there in 1992, when there were only five attorneys and they were generalists – defending inmate and employee grievances, complaints and lawsuits; as well as transactional work related to building, maintaining and operating the state prisons. Robin soon specialized in employee litigation, appearing frequently before the Civil Service Commission, the Human Relations Commission, various Administrative Law Judges and before judges in both state and federal courts.

She soon became a Deputy Chief Counsel, and her strength as an attorney guided the office. She was disciplined and meticulous in her preparation, which enabled this busy office to stay afloat – anyone could pick up a file and run with it if needed. She knew how important it was to prevent burnout, to work as a team. She was tough in tough situations, but also had a calming effect on those around her – her stock phrase was “take a deep breath” when a problem arose. She taught younger attorneys by example and observation, working long hours herself so she could make time to do this. She had high expectations, cared about the reputation of the office, and made sure it functioned well. Colleagues said “she had your back” and “she was a rock.” She supervised all the Department's paralegals, and reduced turnover in those jobs. She also ran a super-successful Toys for Tots drive each year, and made sure everyone's birthday was remembered and celebrated, including her own.

In 2000, she became President of what is now the Keystone Bar Association, an affinity bar association for minority attorneys, then called the Harrisburg Black Attorneys Association. She started a joint dinner with the Dauphin County Bar Association that brought many

distinguished guest speakers to Harrisburg. This included Michael D. Benjamin, a lawyer-scholar whose work reveals the history of African-American attorneys from original sources.

Despite her very demanding professional activities, Robin was not all work and no play. She was an accomplished cook, hostess, flower arranger, Uno player, knitter and shopper. She was the family photographer, and a fan of the Philadelphia Eagles football team and 76ers basketball team. She celebrated her birthday each October 29 with friends as well as at work. You could call her on the phone at night and talk about anything. She was active in her church, which included spending time with children in need – four little girls became frequent guests at the Lewis home. Like E.B. White, she seemed to awake each day “torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy it.”

### *Later Life*

When Robin was 42 years old, she and Claude became the guardians of her 10-year-old niece Brittany Ransom, who came to live with them. Robin went from being the office “Mom” to having a child of her own at home. Everything changed. For example, she and Claude had loved their annual trip to the Outer Banks of North Carolina in early Fall for a peaceful, relaxing vacation together. But no longer – Brittany was in school in the Fall! Robin learned about school dances and homework and navigating the teen years. And she embraced the joys and struggles of this new journey with Brittany and Claude.

Robin was already in poor health. She had problems with her knees, her hips, her back. Knee replacements succeeded after a period of rehabilitation where Robin worked on case files to the therapists’ dismay. She celebrated her birthday with her family and office family at the rehabilitation center. A hip replacement then failed, confining Robin to a wheelchair with a painful swelling of her legs. She still returned to work, and Claude drove her there and picked her up every day. Finally she had to retire – she had cancer. When I asked a colleague how she was able to do what she did during this time, he replied “sheer will.” Mother Theresa’s words come to mind: “I know God will not give me anything I can’t handle. I just wish that He didn’t trust me so much.”

Her last birthday celebration was a dinner with girlfriends at her home, where Robin did not insist on cooking the meal, but did insist on handing out trick-or-treat candy to the neighborhood kids. She had a good time.

Her minister, The Reverend Nathaniel Gadsden, expressed his ease in giving Robin's eulogy, because her many virtues meant he did not have to embroider or omit anything about her life! He also stated that, from a minister you hear a sermon but, when you were with Robin Lewis, you saw a sermon, in her way of being, doing and living.

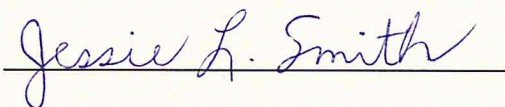
### *Conclusion*

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that in the passing of Robin Marie Phillips Lewis, the Bar, the Court, and the community have lost a friend, a mentor, a distinguished professional colleague and a valued citizen. We tender our sympathy and condolences to her husband, her niece, her family and many friends.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that we reaffirm for ourselves that the life example she gave us, of perseverance, generosity of spirit, service to others, strength in adversity and a full and balanced life, is one which we would do well to emulate.

AND RESOLVED FURTHER that copies of this Memorial Resolution be spread upon the records of the Dauphin County Court and the Dauphin County Bar Association, that the original and a copy be filed with the Office of the Prothonotary, and copies transmitted to her family members.

Respectfully submitted, this 6<sup>th</sup> day of April, 2016, by this Resolution Committee:

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jessie L. Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Jessie L. Smith, Esquire, Chair

Rhonda L Daviston

Rhonda L. Daviston, Esquire

Gwendolyn T Mosley

Gwendolyn T. Mosley, Esquire, Presenter

Dianne I Nichols

Dianne I. Nichols, Esquire

Mary H Powell

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