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William J. Harbison

*Thomas J. Sherrard, III **

Over the last twenty years, I had the great good fortune to come to know Justice William Harbison in a variety of ways: first, as a colleague at Vanderbilt Law School when I moved to Nashville from Atlanta to teach some of the business courses at Vanderbilt; later as a neighbor when my family moved into the house next door to Bill and Mary Lib; and finally, and in the most far-reaching way, as Bill's law partner.

Bill joined Sherrard & Roe after his retirement from the Tennessee Supreme Court in the spring of 1990. Although I didn't appreciate it fully at the time, his arrival proved to be a defining event for our firm. To a group of practitioners in a growing law practice still trying to identify clearly our professional objectives and philosophy of practice, Justice Harbison served as an immediate and constant exemplar of those qualities and attributes that we most admired and that we knew should be perpetuated in our firm.

Of course, we all knew before Bill Harbison joined our firm that he was no ordinary mortal. One of the qualities that made him unique was his ability to bring his superb intellectual talents to bear on a matter in the most quiet and unassuming way. His memory was legendary, and I must say that the passage of time had not diminished it. Bill could, and often did, recall cases by name and cite to them by book and page number, and it was clear that it had probably been months, or maybe even years, since he had read the case. Bill also possessed incomparable analytical skills, and he could slice through the most complicated problems and define concisely the controlling principle or issue involved. And in a wonderfully complementary way to these gifts of memory and analysis, Bill possessed a powerful intuition. Bill would often have a "hunch" about how a problem should be solved, and in every case I can remember his hunches were right. I remember remarking to Bill about his ability to exercise good judgment so consistently on so many kinds of problems, and in his self-effacing way he replied, "Well, Tom, if it was good judgment, then

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it came from lots of experience, and that experience . . . well . . . that came from bad judgment.”

From his first day with us, Bill Harbison was available to everyone in the firm. He was always ready to talk, prepared to interrupt whatever he was doing, and he welcomed everyone to come and sit with him. His interest in others was genuine, and he was open and warm to all ideas. Very soon he became a mentor and positive resource to the younger lawyers in the firm.

And so, quietly and modestly, without fanfare, Bill Harbison made his presence powerfully felt within the firm. He listened to us and counseled us, joked with us and took us into his confidence. He reminded us of the importance of excellence in all things, and he bore witness to the qualities of civility, courtesy, and respect for others that he believed were part of the lawyer's abiding professional commitment. As with most great teachers, he taught by personal example in the way he lived and worked each day. One of the poignant ironies for all of us was that Bill's death occurred immediately following a day-long retreat during which we sought to define our mission as a law firm and to set forth those values that we wished to be part of our joint practice. Bill contributed much to our efforts on that day, and our statement of mission and ideals owes much to the three years we were privileged to have Bill Harbison in our midst.