

Judge: Some in office show courage by taking a stand

By Frank Boyett

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Service and courage are the keys to leaving a legacy, Kentucky Supreme Court Justice Bill Cunningham told the Henderson Rotary Club on Thursday.

Service only takes work, he said. "Most local officials who stay in office time and time again are there for you 24 hours a day."

Courage is another matter, especially when it flies in the face of public opinion. And often it's not until years later that courage is recognized.

Cunningham used Augustus O. Stanley of Henderson as one of his prime examples. Stanley was elected governor in 1915, and demonstrated physical and moral bravery when he went to Murray to face down a mob that not only was threatening to lynch a prisoner, but also the circuit judge who refused to bring the prisoner back to Calloway County for trial.

For those actions, Stanley is "one of very few" whites to be included in the Kentucky Civil Rights Hall of Fame. "He had courage at a time when it wasn't popular to stand up for civil rights."

The full story of Stanley's stand can be found in Cunningham's book, "A Distant Light," which also tells the story of Gov. Ned Breathitt, who "signed the first civil rights act south of the Mason-Dixon line.

"Ned Breathitt told me not long before he died that it was years before he could go back to Christian County, there was so much heat because of that."

Other examples of courage Cunningham cited were Gov. Ruby Laffoon's support for a sales tax during the Depression, so the state would have matching funds for federal grants, and Gov. Julian Carroll's support for a totally revised judicial system in the mid-1970s.

Carroll faced a tough fight because every county judge in the state opposed it, and every bail bondsman was against it because it outlawed their profession. "Kentucky still stands as a beacon for having done away with that," Cunningham said.

But courage and service are not just for the high and mighty, Cunningham said. Ordinary citizens should keep them in mind, also. "There's no way you can pay jurors what they are worth because it would bankrupt the state," he said, noting they are paid \$12.50 a day. "It's a duty, a sacrifice."

The justice from Princeton also said that ordinary citizens need to keep in mind that courage is not always apparent at first glance, that it can sometimes take decades to reveal itself.

"The problem we've got in this country is people who are not willing to respect a stand," he said. "We've become one-issue voters. If someone does what he thinks is right, and shows courage ... then you vote against him. We've got to be able to quit doing that."



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