



In Center Court:

W. Anthony Jenkins

Basketball court or a court of law—he knows the strategy

By Naseem Stecker

It's inescapable—the first thing one notices about W. Anthony Jenkins is just how tall he is. At 6 feet 7 inches, he gets the prize for being the lankiest leader in the history of the State Bar. He's also probably the only former basketball-player-turned-lawyer to head the 41,000-plus members of the State Bar of Michigan.

Jenkins played professionally in Europe and South America after graduating from Harvard University in 1974, and is listed as one of the “great scorers” in the Ivy League school's archives. In fact, he was a draft pick of the Boston Celtics, but his Harvard coach, Tom “Satch” Sanders, who had played in the NBA for the Celtics for 13 years, advised him to try playing basketball abroad because he was not at the top of the Celtics' list. Jenkins very fondly recalls those early days playing basketball in Italy, Spain, Venezuela, and Columbia.

“It wasn't a demanding schedule. We played once a week and we might have had a couple of practices during the week, but the rest of the time was my time,” he said. “I could travel, I could stay at home and read, or do whatever I wanted to do.”

Basketball was—and still is—a passion. It had opened many doors, but toward the end of his foreign tour Jenkins decided that for the long term, it wasn't the best course for him.

His wife of 28 years, Sondra, who met Jenkins during freshman year at Harvard, recalls: “When we graduated from college, while most of us had our fingers crossed hoping to be accepted to graduate school, Tony was weighing options like law school, playing professional basketball, or taking advantage of a Rockefeller Fellowship to go to Africa.”



Courtesy photo

Tony in his Dickinson Wright office in Detroit

That, in fact, was what he did after his basketball stint. A lingering interest in international affairs based on course work at Harvard took him to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in March 1975 where he studied the country's foreign trade sector and deepened his interest in public policy. He applied to the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton.

“Once admitted, I learned that Princeton shared joint degree programs with a couple

of participating law schools,” he said. “I applied and was admitted to NYU's law school and started a four-year track toward getting both degrees.” He graduated from Princeton in June 1979 and New York University School of Law one year later.

A quiet, soft-spoken, thoughtful man, Jenkins has practiced at Dickinson Wright in Detroit for the last 16 years focusing on corporate and public finance transactions, real estate, and minority-certified joint ventures—



an area of the law for which he is nationally recognized. He volunteers at a local organization, writes articles, and speaks at business forums to address different aspects of minority certification.

"It has been fulfilling for me to learn this area of the law and to use it as a tool to help people of color start and grow their business enterprises," he said.

It's also a way for him to give back to a city that nurtured him and helped him find his own path in life. Jenkins is on the board of many civic organizations in Detroit—a city beleaguered with high unemployment and poverty rates. He'll respond generously to people's plights reported in the newspapers. On one occasion, he actually pulled together a number of investors and started a nonprofit transportation company so workers who were unable to get to their jobs because of commuter cuts could get to their workplaces.

"He is able, because of his relationships, to pull together coalitions to make a meaningful difference on something significant, and he does it quietly," said Sondra Jenkins.

Jenkins traces his roots to Bessemer, Alabama, a once-flourishing steel town. His family moved to the Black Bottom neighborhood on Detroit's east side in the mid '50s in search of a better life. At first they lived with relatives, but then relocated to a community near Gratiot and Van Dyke. Growing up in the racially mixed neighborhood evokes happy memories. He had strong scholastic, athletic, and musical talents and played the cello beginning in fourth grade, but it was basketball that fired his passion. His life changed dramatically when, in the ninth grade, he earned a scholarship to Shattuck School, a private boarding school located in

the rural farming town of Faribault, Minnesota. He recalls being one of only four people of color at the school.

"That was the first time I was in a community where I felt I wasn't always welcome in all quarters," he said. "I must say that I experienced things on campus that I knew were targeted at me because I was a person of color. The worst thing was finding racial epithets on school books or on the walls in the dormitories. Next to that, there were times when people would ask questions of you—out of innocence, not out of malice—but it just showed that they had very little exposure to people of color."

It was a difficult first year—having to also deal with a tougher curriculum, strict discipline, and no Motown music. "When I would turn on the radio, I didn't hear the same kind of music that I used to listen to back home in Detroit, and my notion of a 'party' was a lot different than what a 'party' meant in a boarding-school setting."

By the time he matriculated, however, he was not only well prepared for college but

Sidelines

- The W. in W. Anthony Jenkins stands for Willie. His father was Willie Lee Jenkins.
- Bessemer, Alabama, is also his mother's birthplace.
- He is the eldest of five children, including a step-sister who is two years his junior.
- The Shattuck School is now co-ed and is known as Shattuck–St. Mary's.
- He's a private person more comfortable in smaller settings.
- He enjoys classical, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and Congolese music and the work of singer-songwriter Van Morrison.
- He's a fan of the Detroit Pistons, but also likes watching the Boston Celtics and Los Angeles Lakers.
- College All-Americans Jimmy Foster and Charlie Yelverton were his teammates when they toured Italy in the summer of 1974. Foster and Yelverton later played in the NBA.
- He has a great memory. While watching a performance of the musical *Cats*, he recognized a *third-grade* classmate in costume as a cast member.
- He's a good cook.

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able to put his boarding-school experiences in perspective. He attributes this to the friendships that he developed with the larger community and, more specifically, with his basketball teammates. "My basketball teammates were not hung up on color; they cared about putting our talents together to be an effective team. That camaraderie helped me tremendously in becoming more comfortable in my high school environment and in moving out of my own smaller world to understanding that the world is a much larger place than that neighborhood from which I came."

The "A Better Chance" organization gave him and thousands of other persons of color a unique educational opportunity to prepare for college and life beyond college. In 1963, some 23 headmasters at selective independent schools made a point to change the profiles and demographics of their student bodies by enrolling students of color who were economically disadvantaged but showed academic promise.

"My experience at Shattuck beginning in 1967 provided invaluable life lessons, whether

in the classroom, in the dormitories, or on the basketball court. One of the most important lessons was learning that I could become friends with people from any walk of life, and that's really what happened. My Harvard experience put that and other lessons in perspective, and that experience provided a great backdrop to what I was looking for in life beyond college."

Well educated, disciplined, and empathetic, Jenkins is a quiet leader who's always ready to lend a hand, whether it's volunteer bar association work in his beloved Detroit or helping a Detroit-area, pre-high school, African-American hockey player in need of a scholarship to attend private boarding school. Studying the law enabled Jenkins to assist and connect with others in a way that basketball could not have. He learned to love the law and to use it to address problems. All who know him speak highly of his abilities to establish rapport and consensus.

As the 76th president of the State Bar, he'd like to be a good steward and to "find better ways of connecting with our mem-

bership in terms of delivering value for their dues." These avenues include providing networking and business development opportunities, cutting-edge technology at a low cost, and online course materials that make serving clients easier for lawyers. He'd also like to come up with alternative ways of reaching the membership by targeting surveys to particular segments of the bar to get a better read of what's working and what's not. Jenkins will be actively engaged in discussions about legal issues that lawyers face as a profession, whether they involve mandatory continuing legal education or ethics rules or whether a meaningful definition of the practice of law can be formulated.

Jenkins is greatly concerned about budgetary pressures that governments are under and the impact on our court system and people's ability to access it. "I've been hearing frightening stories from across the country where court systems are looking for ways to consolidate, or they've had to terminate or furlough employees or cut back on the number of days that the court is actually open and functioning. When those kinds of things occur, they adversely impact access to our justice system and can undermine confidence in our legal system. It is a problem of national scale and of particular concern to me given Michigan's budgetary outlook."

Another important issue to Jenkins is how to attract and retain the highest quality talent possible for the bench, both at the federal and state levels. "On top of these current budgetary problems, not enough is being done to fairly compensate our judges. Our justice system cannot afford to lose good talent because people feel that they 'can't afford to be a judge' in the first instance or sitting judges decide that they can't afford to remain on the bench and leave. So I'd like to see some things done to make sure that we continue to have a strong and talented judiciary."

A special priority during his term as president will be to increase diversity in the legal profession, which is still predominantly populated by white males in a nation that is becoming increasingly diverse. "I'd like to put in place diversity/inclusion initiatives and get to a point where there are at least some fundamental assessment tools available to

Courtesy photo



Back row, left to right: Brother Marty, stepfather Jonas Jackson, mother Mattie Jackson, Tony, father Willie, and brother Jonathan. Front row: Sister Karen, niece Marti, sister-in-law Gail, and wife Sondra.

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measure progress in the Michigan legal community. The rationales for diversity in the legal profession are many: diversity brings with it broader, rather than less, citizen participation in governance and in turn yields greater trust in how government works and in the rule of law; the globalization of business increasingly calls for cultural and linguistic diversity; legal training is often a path to leadership (our nation's first African-American president being an example) and so access to that training should be inclusive; and demographic trends show that our society is becoming increasingly diverse and the legal professional should be part of that progression."

It comes as no surprise that Jenkins' leadership style will emphasize the team approach—a very adaptable management method for organizations such as bar associations or law firms. "Competitive basketball taught me the importance of being part of a team and pooling talents in trying to be a successful unit and, most importantly, the importance of understanding your role as a member of that team and how execution of that role best positions the team for success." As State Bar president, he aims to *deliver*. ■

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Full Court Press

Tony is a very well-prepared lawyer on behalf of his clients and is well qualified to lead the State Bar of Michigan because of his service to the Bar on committee work and as a commissioner. He served as a member of the Board of Governors of the American Bar Association and resigned from that to become a member of a federal judiciary committee at the request of ABA President Carolyn Lamb because of its enormous importance in providing guidance to the president of the United States on appointments to district and circuit courts and the United States Supreme Court. . . . He's a quiet person, reserved but very knowledgeable. Nothing, absolutely nothing, slips by him.

Tony is quite religious, but he does not wear it on his sleeve. He is active in his church and his community, and that makes for a well-rounded person who can listen to other views and help reach consensus, lead, and make a decision when necessary.

Dennis W. Archer, Chairman and CEO

Dickinson Wright PLLC

I have known Tony for probably 25 to 30 years. Over the years, he has become a valued advisor and friend. Tony has a coolness under pressure, an ability to step back and analyze the downside as well as the upside of a particular business deal. . . . Tony will be a good leader for several reasons: his calm demeanor, which generates such confidence in his judgment and leadership style; his work ethic; and his determination to get the job done.

As bright and hardworking as he is, there is also a fun-loving side to Tony. He is an excellent cook and loves to cook for his friends. He's very, very good with the grill. People travel far and wide to sample some of his grilling—in the winter as well as the summer, I might add!

Derek T. Batts

Union Heritage Capital Management

He is extraordinarily bright, well read, and has deep knowledge on a broad range of things.

He has earned the respect of people around him since he was a youngster—just the way he carries himself and handles his business. He's very well respected and very disciplined, with high standards for himself.

Tony has a remarkable propensity to not only make friends, but to cultivate and sustain genuine friendships. Because of his friendships he is able to put together coalitions to make a meaningful difference on something significant, and he does it quietly.

Sondra Jenkins, Director of Organization Development and Human Resources

The Detroit Institute of Arts