In Memoriam: Jerome C. Hafter

by Jequita Harmon Napoli

Jerome C. Hafter, former chair of the NCBE Board of Trustees (1998–1999) and chair of NCBE’s Technology Committee since 1999, passed away on September 23, 2016. The following is a tribute to Jerry written by Jequita Harmon Napoli, who chaired the NCBE Board of Trustees from 2002 to 2003.

Jerry C. “Jerry” Hafter was a giant in the world of bar admissions. It was obvious from my first conversations with Jerry at NCBE conferences beginning in 1988 that Jerry knew a lot about practically everything, not the least of which was bar examination and administration. We first served on an NCBE committee together, the MEE policy committee, in 1991. That meeting at a fogged-in hotel in Portland, Maine, ultimately led to a great friendship, which lasted until his death on September 23, 2016.

A lifetime resident of Greenville, Mississippi, Jerry was born on May 16, 1945. He was a proud product of Greenville public schools, where he was valedictorian of his high school class of 1963. Jerry then attended Rice University, where he graduated summa cum laude with a double major in history and political science. He was elected student association president, was selected for Phi Beta Kappa, and received the Hugh Scott Cameron Award as the outstanding Rice graduate for the class of 1967. Following his graduation from Rice, Jerry attended Magdalen College, Oxford University, as a Marshall Scholar, where he was awarded a B.A./M.A. with First Class Honours in the School of Modern History in 1969. Jerry’s thesis on the legislative history of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 won the Sara Norton Prize for best thesis on a topic in American history or political science. Finally, pursuing his ultimate academic goal, Jerry attended Yale Law School, where he was a director of the Yale Moot Court and associate editor of the Yale Law Journal. He earned his J.D. in 1972.

While at Yale, Jerry served as student commander of the Yale University Army ROTC and was recognized in 1971 as a distinguished military graduate. After serving as student commander, Jerry was commissioned as an officer in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, serving 16 years on active duty and in the Army Reserve. At Engineer Officer Basic School, he achieved the status of honor graduate, first in academic rank. Perhaps his most notable service was as commander of Company D, 467th Engineer Battalion, which was awarded the 1982 Emerson C. Itschner Award as the Most Outstanding Engineer Company in the Army Reserve. In 1987 Jerry was an honor graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff School. He was also awarded the Army Commendation Medal and Meritorious Service Medal. He retired from military service with the rank of major.

Following law school graduation, Jerry served as law clerk to the Honorable Charles Clark, United States Court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit. He then practiced law at the firm founded by his late father, where he was a partner from 1976 to 2001. From 2001 until his death, Jerry was a partner with Phelps Dunbar LLP. Jerry’s practice was varied but primarily concentrated on corporate law and litigation, contracts, banking, real property, agribusiness, state and local taxation, and intellectual property law. He developed an extensive international practice, establishing international company operations throughout the world and mentoring other Mississippi attorneys in international trade and licensing.

Jerry married Jo Cille Dawkins of Jackson, Mississippi, in 1976. They made their home in Greenville. Their son, Jerome Bryan Hafter, was born in 1981. Like his father, Bryan attended Greenville public schools and was an honor graduate of T.L. Weston High School. Jo Cille filled Jerry’s life with her great humor and extensive community involvement. Jerry’s professional and public service included 22 years as chair of the Mississippi Board of Bar Admissions (the longest term in Mississippi history), during which he was the driving force behind reforming Mississippi’s bar admissions processes; service on the Mississippi State Bar Association, including two years as director of the Young Lawyers Division of the Mississippi State Bar; president of the Washington County Bar Association; member and five-term president of the Board of Trustees of the Greenville Public School District; and service on the Mississippi School Board Association, the City of Greenville Election Commission, and the Mississippi Governor’s Commission on Revision of the Mississippi Constitution. In 2015, he received the Mississippi Bar’s Lifetime Achievement Award.

Nationally, Jerry served as member and chair (1998–1999) of NCBE’s Board of Trustees and, at the time of his death, was in his seventeenth year as chair of its Technology Committee. He was elected to the American Law Institute as a life member and was a fellow of the Mississippi Bar Foundation and the American Bar Foundation; and he served on the Council of the ABA Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar, serving as chair of the Section and the Council, as well as serving on the Section’s Law School Accreditation Committee.

In addition to Jerry’s devotion to his family, he was a friend to many, including President Bill Clinton and Hillary Rodham Clinton, classmates from Yale. Upon hearing of Jerry’s death, Hillary Clinton penned a personal letter to Jo Cille acknowledging “Jerry’s contributions to the legal profession, service to our country, commitment to his community, and love for his family that made him an exemplary lawyer, citizen, husband, and father. He was loved by many, and he will be dearly missed.”

It was common for Jerry to reflect on his feeling that he was standing on the shoulders of the giants in bar admissions who came before him. He was paraphrasing the metaphor of the twelfth-century philosopher and scholar Bernard of Chartres. As the metaphor goes, standing on the shoulders of giants enables us to see more and further than our predecessors. What a gift to have stood on the shoulders of this giant.