An Unassuming Leader

It is easy to spot attorney K J among the sea of business suits at the Dallas County Courthouse; he is the one wearing a Hawaiian shirt, shorts, and moccasins. One might not expect a successful criminal defense attorney to be dressed so casually. However, Mr. J’s appearance earns him nary a glance from his peers; they have become accustomed to his ways by now. His attire properly reflects his laid back attitude as he strolls into court, preparing to meet with one of many clients. He is, after all, in high demand.

Mr. J is well-known, well-liked, and well-respected among his peers. Most of them joke that he is the only one who can go before a judge in his infamous casual attire. Clients immediately recognize him as he walks the halls of the courthouse, as do judges, prosecutors and other defense attorneys. After nearly thirty-two years practicing law, Mr. J has managed to build a lucrative law practice, and he is not showing any signs of stopping.

EARLY YEARS

K J was raised in lower-middle class Houston. He attributes much of his leadership skills to his parents. He describes them as being the perfect compliments that nurtured his middle ground personality. According to Mr. J, his mother was the gregarious type, beloved and adored by all. She would go out of her way for anyone, and those around her always felt her loving and caring nature. His father, on the other hand,
was the quiet, diplomatic type. Mr. J explained how his father, a sixth grade drop out, went from being a truck driver to the president of the trucking company, which is perhaps where Mr. J received most of his strong will and determination. Mr. J fondly recalled how his father would listen to everyone bicker about a topic until they ultimately turned to him, asking for his opinion. His father would then quietly assess the arguments and give his opinion and simple solution and, amazingly, everyone always agreed and a consensus was always reached.

Mr. J was not born K J; rather, his legal name is W. E. J. The nickname K is compliments of his older sister, Kay. Kay gave him the nickname after the syrup because of she wanted a “sweet brother,” and low and behold it stuck. In fact, during his first year as a practicing attorney, Mr. J opted to be listed in the phonebook under “W. E. J” since, he reasoned, it sounded much more professional than K J. Shortly thereafter, he received a call from a civil attorney by the name of W. E. J, III, whom insisted that Mr. J change his listing in the phonebook since he was receiving calls from the county jail meant for Mr. J at all hours of the night. Mr. J apologized and decided it was a sign and immediately readopted his trademark nickname.

GEARING UP FOR SUCCESS

Mr. J always knew he wanted to become a criminal defense lawyer. During the Great Depression, Mr. J’s father visited the county courthouse several times a week, observing various criminal trials simply for entertainment. When Mr. J was a child, his father would talk about the trials he saw, reciting almost word-for-word everything from the opening to the closing arguments. Mr. J was so intrigued that he decided right then
and there that he would become an attorney, and not just any attorney – a criminal defense attorney.

After attending the University of Texas and majoring in psychology, Mr. J went on to Saint Mary’s School of Law in Texas. From there, he went straight into private practice. It is interesting to note that Mr. J opted to go a different route that many criminal defense lawyers choose to go. Many criminal defense attorneys start at the District Attorney’s Office as it is very difficult to maintain a successful law practice as a sole practitioner straight out of law school. However, Mr. J, already showing his willingness to take a risk, was bound and determined to succeed.

**BUILDING A BOOMING BUSINESS**

Starting from scratch with nothing but a unique name and a dream proved quite difficult for Mr. J in the beginning. There is no question that the criminal defense arena is particularly competitive since it seems there are always more lawyers on hand than necessary. After years of taking various small cases in order to pay the bills, he started generating more word-of-mouth business. Former clients started to talk about his low-key style, fearless representation, and of course his always unique choice of clothing. Finally, his name was out there, and people were eager to retain him and ready to pay big money at that.

While building his reputation with clients, he started building upon his reputation as a zealous and unique criminal attorney at the courthouse as well. Time and time again, Mr. J has been sought out and retained or appointed to represent clients in high profile cases, such as for the ring leader in the infamous “Texas Seven” group that escaped from
a Texas prison in 2000. Judges and other lawyers have come to trust and rely on him. They know that he will provide the best representation he possibly can for his clients.

**IT’S ALL ABOUT THE PEOPLE**

Mr. J believes that having great people skills and expertise in an area are at least two quintessential skills a successful leader needs to have. Fortunately for Mr. J, he has both. In fact, he has used these skills in order to build his unquestionably successful criminal law practice. His engaging personality ensures that he never meets a stranger, and his advanced knowledge of criminal law draws a certain degree of respect from others in his field. He is constantly drawing on his knowledge and experience while working with other attorneys on cases, where there is usually never a shortage of opinions. “It is important,” Mr. J explains, “to use your personal experience, preparation, and expertise to get others to agree with what you think is the correct way to do something.”

In addition to people skills and expertise, Mr. J believes that in order to be a good leader, you have to get your hands dirty. In other words, a leader has to be willing to do at least as much as he expects of his followers. He also places great value on the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” He believes it is important to respect those you are working with. To Mr. J, strong working relationships go beyond business; there also has to be a genuine interest in a person’s personal life, their values, and even their interests. “You have to show you care about people,” he says.

Finally, Mr. J places great emphasis on simply listening to others. “You should listen to what other people have to say,” he suggests, “and be truly interested in them and what they have to say.” Even though he is a lawyer and talking is a large part of his job,
he thinks listening to others makes him a better leader. He also recommends that you should ask people questions after they are done speaking to let them know that you are interested in and understand what they are trying to say.

**FUNNY BUSINESS**

Mr. J says he often uses humor and plain old fashioned kindness to connect with people. Perhaps we should stop the presses, as who would have thought humor and kindness could be found in a lawyer? However, anyone who knows Mr. J can attest that this statement is more than true. He goes by a saying his mother often used, “you catch more flies with honey than vinegar,” and explains that people are more apt to allow a person to lead if they are happy to do things for their leader as opposed to feeling resentful and undervalued.

Mr. J never lacks for a humorous story to brighten someone’s day. Humor is a necessity in life, he insists, even in the workplace. He cites Herb Kelleher, co-founder, chairman, and former CEO of Southwest Airlines, as one of his role models. “I think we have the same style of leadership,” Mr. J explains. “The people work with him, not for him.” He also appreciates the humorous approach Mr. Kelleher incorporated into his business and how he made everyday enjoyable for his employees. He pointed out how it seems like it was almost an adventure to go to work everyday for the employees of Southwest Airlines. He also explained that he preferred to be a leader that makes tasks creative, enjoyable, and fun, like Kelleher, rather than adopting a dictator form of leadership wherein everyone has to do each task the same way.
TRAGEDY STRIKES

Although it is his nature, it was difficult for Mr. J to maintain his humor throughout most of 2006 and early 2007. In May of 2006, tragedy struck the J family. Mr. J started displaying bizarre behavior, completely out of character for him. He was angry one minute and delusional and disoriented the next. His family knew that there was something terribly wrong, so he was admitted into the hospital. The next couple of weeks, his condition worsened to the point that doctors began to prepare his family and friends for the worst. The doctors did not have a diagnosis and could not explain how the man his friends and family knew - strong, loving and kind - deteriorated into a weak, feeble man, unable to speak a coherent sentence, in a matter of weeks.

Frustrated and unwilling to give up on him, Mr. J’s family transferred him to another hospital. Fortunately, the doctors at the new hospital were able to properly diagnose Mr. J and reverse the side effects of his illness. As the days progressed, the man his family and friends once knew slowly came back to life, and after weeks of therapy, he was almost restored to his original health. The doctors who said that he would never practice law again if he even survived were amazed at his dramatic recovery.

With his health in good order, Mr. J returned to his practice to try to pick up where he had left off almost a year before. He shared how the experience changed his perspective. However, it was not so much that it changed his outlook on life; he always had a good outlook on life and was generally happy and upbeat. Rather, it changed part of him nobody could readily see from the outside - his self-confidence.

Mr. J found himself questioning some of the things he used to be so confident in doing in his practice. He knew that peoples’ lives often depended on his abilities, and
that there was little room for error, which made it even more difficult. However, he was determined to move on and live his life and practice criminal law like he once did. Within a couple of months and after a lot of practice, Mr. J finally started to gain confidence back. Those who knew him before, during and after his illness are amazed of his recovery and truly believe that it serves as a demonstration of his strong will and unwavering strength.

PRESENT SUCCESS

Amazingly, Mr. J’s law practice has recovered even faster than his physical health did. Although Mr. J worried how his illness might impact his practice, people continue to seek him out for representation in serious state and federal cases. It is almost as if he never missed a beat. In fact, business is better now than ever. He just wrapped up a headline worthy case and is starting on yet another high profile case. Those that are just now meeting him are surprised to hear about the illness that almost took his life, if they even hear about it at all. Mr. J does not dwell or fall victim to the past. He simply lives on, vowing to do what he needs to in order to live his life to the fullest.

CLOSING ARGUMENT

Mr. J expressed utter surprise at being considered a leader by anyone. He simply looks at himself as just an ordinary person living the life he wants to lead and enjoying it in the meantime. He should not be shocked, however, as he has proven to be everything a leader should be. He is strong, resilient, adventurous, and willing to make time for others. His kind and caring attitude exemplifies leadership and serves to make others around him comfortable following his lead. The unassuming man preparing for court in
the Hawaiian shirt, shorts, and moccasins is indeed a true leader, as everyone, except perhaps himself, can clearly see.