

Mike Williamson: A Great Man Who Did It His Way, with Excellence and Expertise

Good afternoon, I'm Judge Williamson's friend and colleague Cathy McEwen. It is my honor to have been invited to speak about Judge Mike, mostly as a judicial colleague, but I will overlap a bit with Ed Comey, Judge Mike's law clerk, and Linda Williamson, Judge Mike's very cool wife.

How many of you saw or heard or read my eulogy for Judge Mike at the celebration of his life? My apologies to you in advance because this is largely the same. Just pretend you are watching a favorite re-run.

On very few occasions, three precisely, Mike told me, in a hushed and reverent tone, "He's a *great man*," nodding his head toward one of these men he was singling out for that honor. I should have responded back to Mike, "well, you are a great man yourself, you know."

Mike Williamson truly was a great man — because he did it his way, and by doing so he got what he aimed for or where he wanted to go pretty much 100 percent of the time. He is, without doubt, the epitome of the Frank Sinatra song *My Way*.

So, what was Mike's way? Mike's way was doing everything . . . with . . . excellence. And his secret to achieving excellence? To become an expert at everything he did — by preparing, researching, learning, and forging strong relationships.

Follow me through some of the *My Way* lyrics to bracket how many ways Mike was an expert, especially when it came to being a judge:

*I've lived a life that's full
Travelled each and every highway*

Well, Mike certainly was an expert in living life and performing his job fully.

He was "one of a kind," said one judge. Another said, "my new motto is 'Be Like Mike.' In other words, live the life you want to live and spend your time the way you want to spend it. Mike loved his work, his travels, being with family and friends, and he focused on what he was doing at the moment."

Mike's judicial career was capped off right before he died with the prestigious American Bankruptcy Institute's William L. Norton, Jr. Award. In Mike's acceptance speech, he wrote that he was "humbled to be recognized for helping contribute to the insolvency system in the United States."

Contribute he did. His body of case law, in a word, is magnificent. Some of my personal favorites are what we discussed in the academic prelude to this reception or are on the handout from that: *Grubbs, LeBeau, and Rasmussen*.

Mike's Middle Florida colleagues received many messages about him upon his passing. More than one talked of his wit, charm, brilliance, and wisdom. Other descriptions were truly accomplished, great leader, creative, pragmatic, a strong presence in any room. One person said, he set the bar as a judge. And another simply said, "one easily runs out of superlatives to describe Mike, as a person and as a jurist. He was one of the most special individuals I have ever encountered."

All judges should aspire to be so described. Mike is role model for us judges on how to do it with excellence. I know that whenever I was pondering a thorny issue, I'd go visit Mike down the hall. If he was just as perplexed as I, then I knew I was in good company. I can't go down the hall to him anymore, so now I just must think, WWMD?

And yes, he traveled each and every highway . . . actually, airways, too.

Mike contributed more than to just the U.S. insolvency system. He was an expert in travelling the world to assist other countries, too. If you've read even a little about Mike's life, you should be aware of his significant dedication to bringing the rule of law, especially in commercial systems, to developing countries. He did this in Azerbaijan — twice, Macedonia, Rwanda, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Afghanistan. Afghanistan was his favorite: He went nine times, creating a land registry, hyping microfinance, and creating a bankruptcy code out of an old version he dug up there from the early 1940s. He taught insolvency law to lawyers and judges in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Republic of Georgia, Bahrain, and Ukraine. On to the next lyric . . .

*I planned each chartered course
Each careful step along the by-way*

Mike was an expert planner, preparer, and he followed his own compass to achieve his goal of excellence in all things: He looked down the road, plotted a course,

whether captaining a boat, going on a trip (down to how many pairs of socks and underwear to bring), riding a motorcycle, creating a case strategy, mapping out a ruling, learning a new electronic gizmo, or checking off a life aspiration. Sometimes the course he set out on might have to change in some way, but then there he was, re-plotting and planning for that turn.

He created, truly out of whole cloth, a thriving bankruptcy practice that rivals those we see in mega cases elsewhere. Right out of Georgetown law school, some friend asked him if he could file a bankruptcy for him, and Mike said sure. Mike didn't even take bankruptcy in law school! He got some mentoring, studied, and learned, and the rest is history. He became a chapter 7 trustee. And when the Bankruptcy Code went effective in 1979, Mike wanted to be the first to file a chapter 13 in Orlando, and he was. He became Orlando's big dog in chapter 11s and one of the first to create a statewide reputation for committee representation. He was invited into the American College of Bankruptcy Fellows in class no IV; he was proud of being inducted in an early class. This is the premiere designation for a bankruptcy professional.

This planning and preparing led him to become a bankruptcy judge with a career unparalleled, truly, by any in our state and even most in the nation. The course he charted as an insolvency lawyer and judge had a trajectory rivaling a rocket ship.

By design, he wrote articles and participated in seminars so that he could drill down in an area to learn it better and become the go-to guy in his field. He spoke at nearly 400 seminars. He wrote more than 200 reported opinions.

In the National Conference of Bankruptcy Judges, he made many friends and sought out many significant leadership roles, such as a member of the Board of Governors, business manager of NCBJ's renowned American Bankruptcy Law Journal, and Editor in Chief of the *Conference News*.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the outward manifestations of Mike's expertise in planning, preparedness, and organization: his constant reading, his binders, and personally created instructions for dummies concerning all manner of endeavors.

Mike loved reading and learning. He was never without a book or his Kindle full of books. He even read grammar books while sitting in the bathroom!

The Williamson binders, those things are legendary! At the celebration of his life, I raised one for all to see. The one I displayed was on witness sequestration. How can anyone have a full notebook on witness sequestration?! That was Mike,

planning to address every argument fully. Given the transition of most everyone and everything to digital content, and now that Mike's not here, I really fear that the binder company could be one of our next chapter 7s.

Mike documented what he learned as he prepared to tackle some subject and created checklists. His "fill-in-the-blank here" for Dummies instruction sheets or checklists covered the waterfront, such as what and how many items to pack for a trip, bidding in bridge, new technology, Dragon Naturally Speaking, building a website showcasing his dog Lizzie when the Internet first came out, new devices, or how to tie nautical knots.

On to the next lyric . . .

I've loved, I've laughed and cried

Mike was an expert at relationships, friendships, loving, and having fun. He was easy to get to know and even easier to like. The friendship he offered was natural, open, and unforced.

You may hear some from Linda about Mike's idyllic family love life. I wanted to mention his family, though, because Mike brought his family, especially Linda, into his judicial family. He kept us up to date on what was happening, how the kids were doing, etc. Of all his many friends, Linda was his finest friend. He so enjoyed her companionship – especially around 7 p.m., when his stomach alarm went off, and he left whatever he was doing to go home for her cooking. That they enjoyed each other's company and their adventures together was palpable. Mike was a good father. He bragged on son Scott's career development and was proud of daughter Michelle for being such a wonderful mother to his and Linda's five grandkids. He revered his brothers and sister and spoke proudly of them to his friends.

Mike loved his friends and was buoyed by them, whether they be lawyers, non-lawyers, judges, or Linda's tennis pals. The outpouring of solace to our judges from the bankruptcy judge community from, literally, across the country is evidence of the solid friendships he developed among his colleagues.

One lawyer wrote me, "He was a teacher and mentor to anyone he met. It didn't matter if you were a law student, an unexperienced lawyer, pro se litigant or if you were an experienced lawyer who frequented his courtroom." Yes, Mike was an

expert at sharing his vast knowledge of just about anything, but especially insolvency law. He so enjoyed his treks to Jeff Davis's advanced class at the University of Florida with Mike Moecker — the best part to our Mike was dinner with the students afterwards. He enjoyed his frequent lectures to the Tampa Bay Bankruptcy Bar Association. On his mentorship, there are more than a few people in this audience here who can speak firsthand on how he assisted with their careers, judges included. Some of us wouldn't have the job we have, me included, without his assistance.

He did have his feminine side, as I like to call it. He teared up at movies, and he communicated extraordinarily well with his female colleagues, like his work wife Mary Maddox and his courtroom deputy Marti Malone, and Judges Delano and Colton and me.

He reveled in the fun outings he enjoyed with friends. He was pretty limitless in the things he enjoyed doing with his friends, whether that be skiing with folks like the Moodys; dancing; playing card games with the Levenses; playing bridge; boating, boating, . . . and more boating, with his Tampa colleagues or folks like Ben Pethe and Judge Fr. Tim Corcoran; motorcycle trips with folks like Judge Greg Holder and others in his motorcycle group; Four Green Fields Fridays; the Galloway Breakfast Club; dressing up in costume; chatting over fine wine or other adult beverages with [pause] . . . really, anyone!; or singing, yes, and his signature song was *My Way* at karaoke.

Speaking of which, on to the next lyric . . .

*To think I did all that
And may I say, not in a shy way,
"Oh no, no, not me
I did it my way"*

No, Mike wasn't shy about doing things his way.

As a judge, Mike was an expert at getting out in front of an issue and writing a significant opinion on it. Even when the issue wasn't squarely before him, he'd share his decision on the issue in dicta so that he could weigh in and shape others' thinking on it. One lawyer called Mike's decisions "groundbreaking."

Mike was an expert at being comfortable in his own skin. One friend said what you saw is what you got, whether with his family, his friends, at parties, or running by himself: Energetic, polite, and straightforward. That's what you saw on the bench, too.

He was a creature of habit and had simple tastes; he was a no-frills kind of guy, except maybe when it came to new toys, such as hand-held devices, boats, and Teslas.

His self-discipline and adherence to routine was to be admired. He got up early, had the *exact* same breakfast every morning at First Watch, got to the office before anyone else (well, maybe not always before Judge Merryday), had the *exact* same lunch everyday — some milkshake concoction, and was off the clock precisely at 5 p.m. This was a carryover from his time as a lawyer; he was able to get his billable hours in from 8 to 5 because, as one former associate put it, “he was focused on work all day, was not much for the water cooler talk.”

Regarding his simplicity in taste, he was okay with Cheap Red Wine [that's really the name of it, and there was a bottle on the memorial table as you came in], albeit he wouldn't turn down the good stuff that the Yadleys would bring to the table or that he would savor at the Tastevan Club.

He was ambivalent about clothes. Here he was a nationally known judge, and he told me once that all he needed was a couple pair of navy pants and one navy blazer, as they gave the appearance of being a real suit, and he'd just get a new one when the blazer or pants would become threadbare. It didn't bother him, either, to wear ratty, sweat-stained t-shirts to run in and then just rinse them out in the courthouse shower.

Mike was an expert even in his playfulness. He had sense of humor, sometimes nuanced, sometimes slapstick. Here are some outtakes from his letters home from Afghanistan:

I'm watching the Grammy's, I don't think it is live so please don't call me to tell me who wins.
(That number is 555-1212 for anyone who does want to call.)

And this . . .

While I have been issued the requisite body armor for my torso (I called up the guy who gave it to me and asked, “Where are the pants?”), I think it is best to just keep a low profile.

And here's a good one from a local lawyer who sponsored the open bar at the TBBBA golf tournaments: The cocktail napkins stated Open Bar Courtesy of [the lawyer's name]. When Mike saw that, he announced that he would consider that lawyer's fee applications more quickly after seeing how he spent his money.

I'll leave you with a couple of his less nuanced bits. Did you know that Mike can hang a spoon off his nose? And his chin? Actually, one on each side of his butt chin? And *all at the same time*? It's a sight to behold. Some know that Mike and I share a wall between our bathrooms at work. We take our breaks from the bench around the same time, so we frequently were in our respective bathrooms at the same time. When we'd hear a flush, one of us would initiate the shave-and-a-hair-cut knock [demonstrate] and the other would return it with the two-bits knock [demonstrate]. I told Mike in his last days at home that my going to the bathroom at work just isn't the same without him.

And a final lyric . . .

***The record shows I took the blows
And I did it my way***

Mike was even an expert in overcoming the rare occasions of adversity. Except for his last challenge with cancer, he didn't really have much of any real disappointments in life — and that's because he adapted and overcame them or changed his chartered course as necessary. His stoic flexibility was amazing. One of his former associates commented on Mike's "sheer bravery," saying, "Mike was never daunted by a case that seemed impossible to solve and he was immune to intimidation by creditor counsel." I think nine trips to Afghanistan is proof positive of that bravery.

Another example is when he had a detached retina. To fix that, the doc injects a bubble to press the retina into place. Well, bubbles float up, correct? What if the detachment is on the lower quadrant of the eye? You must keep your head almost upside down. For Mike, no problem. He simply put one end of his couch on a big stack of law books so that it was on a 45-degree angle and stayed there the requisite number of days. See, even in distress, he did it his way. He never showed any self-pity.

At the end of his life, Mike never cried, he was resolute, gutted it out, lips set in steeled determination, almost non-plussed by it all. Cancer may have broken his

body, but not his spirit. I told him a few days before he died, “whatever your dad, Jack, faced on that beachhead on D-Day, what you’re going through is just as tough.” Mike nodded his head in agreement, gravely, stoically. About three times that week, I was compelled to tell him that he’s the bravest man I ever saw.

This last disappointment of his was, really, that he was unable sail off into the sunset, literally, with his devoted and fun wife, Linda, upon retirement. And yet, I think that expert planner, that expert preparer in him knew that all he was doing was changing course — that the sailing off into the sunset is still part of the plan, after all. I say this because hanging on the wall in his chamber, straight ahead when he walked out of his office door was an original watercolor of a beautiful trawler. It rests in a peaceful inlet with calm blue water and a bright sky. Now close your eyes so that you can visualize it in your mind’s eye as I provide the last piece of information about this boat. On the back of the trawler is its name [pause]: *Next Life*.

Now, hold that thought as you hear from the great man himself: [Play video/audio of Mike singing My Way.]

Thank you, Mike for doing it your way and letting us all enjoy you as you did so.