

“TREE”

*Michele Roberts**

I decided well before my teens that I would not just be a *lawyer*. I was going to be a *public defender*. I was, therefore, delighted to learn that a public defender office existed that was afforded the same respect and admiration enjoyed by some of this nation’s premier law firms—The Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia (“PDS”). Its lawyers were considered among the best and the brightest in the profession and the agency provided its attorneys all resources necessary to assure their clients received the highest quality representation. In my third year of law school, I applied for a position at PDS and awaited a decision with baited breath.

While awaiting what would ultimately (thank God!) be an offer of employment, friends and strangers frequently asked me about my plans upon graduation. I shared my hope of employment at PDS. This was the point at which it first began to happen. “Oh, that’s Charles Ogletree’s office!” It was uncanny. With few exceptions, whenever I mentioned PDS, the response would be the same: “That’s Charles Ogletree’s office.” Sometimes they would refer to him as “Tree.”

Mind you, I had never heard of this “Tree” fellow before. While it was initially amusing that this chap seemed to enjoy quite a fan base, it soon became a bit annoying. It was bad enough that this guy (who was no more than three to four years older than I was) had groupies from coast to coast¹ who thought of him as a clone of both Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. However, I was also told that “Tree” was likely blossoming into one of the best trial lawyers in the profession. I could barely contain my envy. While I never seriously considered not working at PDS if an offer were extended, I did ultimately decide to forego mentioning PDS if asked about future plans. “I’m considering a couple of options,” became my rote response.

Shortly before graduation from law school, I was paying a last visit with a client serving a life sentence at San Quentin.² This client, whom I represented in connection with prison disciplinary proceedings, had been incarcerated for nearly a decade. He knew I was soon leaving school and asked about my future plans. Certain no harm could come of it, I told him about PDS. When he responded, “That’s where Charles Ogletree works,” I thought I would explode. “How in the world can you know this guy?!” I shrieked. My client shared with me how, as a student at Stanford, “Tree”

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1. My family lived in New York, and I attended law school in California. I heard the “Tree” reference in both places.

2. The death sentence originally imposed had been vacated.

also represented him in connection with disciplinary matters. He said, "I know that if Tree were a lawyer at the time of my trial, I would never have been convicted!" I was floored.

I will never forget my first day at PDS. I was both anxious and excited: Excited about the good work I knew I would be privileged to do with such an extraordinary group of lawyers, while anxious about my ability to fit in with such an austere group. There were an odd number of lawyers entering the agency that year—a group of seven. First-year lawyers shared an office—two in each office. Someone in our class had to share an office with one of the senior lawyers. I was the odd one out. Yep, you guessed it. I still remember the words: "Michele, you'll be sharing an office with Charles Ogletree." Life has a strange way of working out.

What I could not and did not appreciate on that day was that being paired up with Tree was one of the truly glorious moments of my life. I was meeting someone who would become my life-long mentor, my blood brother, and my most precious friend. Tree has been there for me professionally and personally in ways he is not even aware of. The depth of love that I and so many others feel for him is not just because of what he does for us personally. You can only feel such love for another who, in his every day interaction with the world, gives of himself unselfishly to all who ask and to many who do not. We love him because he inspires us.

Thank you Pam, Charles, and Rashida for letting us steal away so much of your time with Tree. It has made each of us, as well as our people, so much the better for it.