



Dan Rodricks
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A very fitting role model

Has it been noted anywhere that Judge Robert M. Bell now sits on the same court that once upheld his conviction? There hardly seems the chance that such irony was pointed out, in that Judge Bell's ascent to the Maryland Court of Appeals went by with scant media coverage. The politics of his appointment might have been well-documented, but his actual oath-taking was barely noted, and therein lies a story.

Bell, a highly regarded black jurist, took the seat that had been occupied since the 1970s by Harry A. Cole, the first black appointed to the state's highest court. Bell has had a steady ascendancy in the Maryland judicial system. He is 47 and has served as a judge for nearly 17 years, having been appointed to the District Court in January 1975. He came up the hard way, via East Baltimore and Dunbar High School, with a detour through Harvard, and he can date his eventful career as a thinking man and constitutional activist back to 1960 and a student sit-in at a restaurant known as Hooper's. More on that in a moment.

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First, a word from Alan Quille, Baltimore parking magnate and friend of William Donald Schaefer: **SEP. 23 1991**

"I attended Judge Bell's swearing-in ceremony in, I guess it was July. And it was a very nice ceremony, beautiful. And there was the usual crowd there — judges and a lot of lawyers and clerks. But something bothered me about it.

"After the ceremony I was with the governor and we were walking back toward the governor's house and I said to him, 'You know, governor, you were preaching to the choir, to all the wrong people.' I said what we should have had was 10 busloads of kids from all over the city of Baltimore, kids who need role models. They're the ones who should have been there watching the ceremony.

"And he was quiet. And after a little while of thinking about it, he said to me, 'That's a good idea, you arrange it and we'll do it all over again.'"

Quille took this to mean that the governor would give Bell the oath a second time if a second ceremony could be arranged. A lot of people might have dismissed Schaefer's comment as symptomatic of the Do-It-Nowitis from which the governor has long suffered. **SEP. 23 1991**

Not Quille.

"I went about arranging it," he said. "Judge Bell is a black man who has been appointed to [the Court of Appeals], and kids need to see this. He is a model for kids to look up to."

More so — to provide the conventional example — than the model Michael Jordan presents. Jordan is a superb, glamorous athlete, a class act. When people think of role models for young boys, especially those who live with deprivation and limited hope, they think of Michael Jordan. He's a role model on a very high, glorious and probably unattainable plane.

Robert Bell provides a far more appealing example, if you're looking, as Alan Quille is, for role models to present to kids. "His career is more conceivable to these kids," is how Quille puts it. Bell came from the same streets the kids at Dunbar know. His activist spirit was first awakened right here in Baltimore, albeit 31 years ago.

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When he was 16, Bell organized a group of students to protest a restaurant's policy of not serving blacks. He led a group of 12 that took seats in Hooper's and refused to leave when ordered. They were arrested and tried under a trespass law. Bell and his comrades were convicted of the misdemeanor. In January 1962, the Maryland Court of Appeals affirmed the convictions.

Three years and a Supreme Court ruling later, the Court of Appeals took up the case again and reversed itself. By then, the civil rights movement was in full swing, and a number of public accommodations laws had been enacted, making the discrimination that had occurred at places like Hooper's illegal.

With the final say by the Court of Appeals, Robert Bell, by then a student at Morgan on his way to Harvard Law, was no longer a convicted misdemeanor. And he had been turned on to the Constitution in a profound way, beyond the intellectual. The citizens who came before him all these years have been served well by the passion he brought to the study of law.

Alan Quille, who served his time as role model for another generation, wants the example of Robert Bell out there, where kids can see it. So, he's springing for the buses. Tomorrow morning, there will be 10 of them transporting students from all over the city to Dunbar to watch Robert Bell take his oath a second time. "I want them to see," Quille says. "I want them to see what they can make of themselves."