



Talbot "Sandy" D'Alemberte

Chancellor, our honorary graduand is a giant of a man who, in one working life, has built three successful careers and as President of Florida State University continues to set new records. First and foremost, he is a distinguished academic, with a brilliant student career, who has served for many years as Professor of Law and Dean of the College of Law at Florida State. He has had an outstanding innings in public service, including membership of the House of Representatives of the Caribbean State of Florida! And he has had a distinguished career at the bar, also serving as President of the American Bar Association.

For those who believe in the prognostic power of the stars and the significance of birthdates, Professor Talbot "Sandy" D'Alemberte presents a colourful conjunction of coincidences. He was born in Tallahassee, Florida, on June the 1st, 1933, and shares a birthday with Marilyn Monroe. But he did NOT go on to become the most famous name in Hollywood. A more interesting coincidence is the fact that June the 1st was also the day, in 1621, when the Mayflower Settlers received their Royal Patent. Like this small band of committed people, in search of religious freedom, Sandy D'Alemberte has committed his life to the pursuit of justice and freedom for all, especially the poor.

He went to public schools in Tallahassee and Chattahoochee, and during World War II to various schools in Massachusetts. His boyhood admiration for the superman of the day, Sir Winston Churchill, inspired his superb skills in rhetoric and his life long love of a bow tie.

His first degree was a BA in Political Science at the highly thought of Episcopal college of the South at Sewanee, in Tennessee - a school with tough academic standards - which inspired the highest degree of intellectual rigour. This was followed by a brief summer school flirtation with Florida State University, in his home town, and then three years of military service. After Officer Training School he served as Navigator on a Destroyer Leader. He returned to academe with a Rotary Foundation Fellowship to the London School

of Economics, better known as LSE, the notorious alma mater of revolutionary politicians, including our own Prime Minister Errol Barrow and Michael Manley of Jamaica. He continued to follow the path of politicians by studying law at the “other” Florida school, the University of Florida. There he distinguished himself in every way, as President of the Student Bar Association, and winning the Award for the “Best Oral Argument in the Southeastern Regional Moot Court Competition” in 1960. No doubt his parents had always said “He should be a lawyer, he loves to argue”.

He entered law practice in 1962, and was elected to the Florida House of Representatives. He chaired numerous committees, including the Florida Constitution Revision commission, leading to his definitive book *The Florida Constitution*. Dull reading, you might think. Well I have just read an essay he wrote on the Constitution, and he almost persuaded me to read the whole book. Of many brilliant observations and insights in that essay I was struck by his discussion of one of his past positions. Of this he bluntly said “I was wrong” - the words only a true leader has the courage to utter. During his political life he received the Capital Press Corps’ Award “Most Outstanding Member of the House” in 1972.

But neither private practice nor politics provided the intellectual challenges that Sandy needed. He was fortunate in finding for his soul mate a wife, Patsy, whose degree in Divinity from Harvard would make her a match for his very best arguments. And children Gabrielle, an attorney, and Joshua, a teacher, have followed in separate ways, their father’s interest in law and teaching. He was not content to spend his life in politics or private practice, although he accepted the challenging post of President of the American Bar Association. He wrote prolifically, both for the popular press and academic journals. And his titles tell the story of his moral code and guiding principles: “A proposal to provide legal access for the Poor”; “A blueprint for improving the civil justice system”; “Justice for all”; “Lawyers have a duty to serve the poor....and judges have a duty to see that they do”; “Calling the roll of lawyers: providing service to all” and so on. And when I read a sample of what he has written, there are recurring themes - justice for the poor and the weak, care and compassion for all. In tribute to a friend and colleague he wrote with simple eloquence: “He made our lives richer. He made our world better. He made our hearts glad”. What beautiful writing. I confess I have not had the pleasure of knowing Sandy D'Alemberte, but I envy those who have.

And so he returned to academe, not to loiter in the common rooms but to create change. He became Professor of Law and Dean of the College of Law at Florida State University. He returned, not to his true alma mater, the “Gators” of the University of Florida, but to his home town and the “Seminoles” of Tallahassee, in 1984, and he has been there ever since. Rumour has it that he ran an extremely student friendly law school, even initiating 24 hour library access. He took up the post of President of the University in January 1994. And both as Dean of Law and as President he has worked to develop a close partnership with the UWI.

Chancellor, it would be impossible to list all of the honours and awards of this gentle giant from Tallahassee, without imposing on the patience and equanimity of our new graduates. But the purpose of this exercise is both to reward and inspire. So I must mention a few, such as the Florida Bar Medal of Honor, the Florida Trial Lawyers Perry Nichols Award (presumably for argument) and the Florida Academy of Television “Emmy”. This was NOT for his dramatic acting, like Marilyn Monroe, but for promoting open government, especially by opening court proceedings to electronic journalists. Not to mention five other Honorary Degrees, and a listing by the National Law Journal as one of the 100 most powerful lawyers in the USA. But don’t assume he can get you off a traffic ticket next time you go to Miami!

Clearly our Honorary Graduate is a mover and shaker of remarkable energy. He has always aimed for the skies, and in his younger days was not only a sportsman but a pilot. He once flew to the Caribbean. And much of his energy since then has been directed to forging links with the UWI. The first of these which he initiated was with our Law Faculty at Cave Hill, in developing the Caribbean Law Institute, but others embrace business, human sciences, social work, the arts and communications. All have emphasised student and faculty exchanges. One of these is the summer program for US law students at Cave Hill, and my own nephew, now a civil lawyer in Orlando, benefited from that programme. I also benefited, as my nephew has continued to keep me up to date with the world literature on Lawyer jokes!

Chancellor, Talbot "Sandy" D'Alemberte is a giant among men, who has remained firmly rooted in his home town of Tallahassee but whose reach has extended far beyond, much to the benefit of the UWI. In recognition of his brilliant scholarship, his inspired leadership and his commitment to improving the lot of his fellow man, I invite you to confer on Talbot "Sandy" D'Alemberte the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.

23rd October 1999