

Leslies Smith and Kenneth Satlin

Leslie Smith was Washington and Lee's first African American law student. He was a 1966 alumnus of St. Paul's College in Lawrenceville, Virginia and a 1969 graduate of the Washington and Lee School of Law. Leslie died in Washington, D.C. in 1971. Police determined that the cause of death was murder, and apparently the case has never been solved.

Kenneth Satlin, Leslie's close friend and classmate, consented to the interview which is attached to this statement.

*Theodore C. De Launey*

Kenneth Satlin, '69  
Remembers Leslie D. Smith, Jr., the First African American  
alumnus of the Washington and Lee School of Law

March 28, 2005

Telephone conversation with Ted DeLaney

Ted, my name is Ken Satlin and I am a Washington and Lee Alumnus of the Law School. In 1966 I came down to Lexington from New York, where I grew up, and I had never been in—every time I think about Les [Leslie Smith] I start crying hopelessly. It is really sad. But we were such good friends. I am a Jewish boy who grew up in Brooklyn, New York and went to Syracuse University and in growing up my parents always talked about the South where my father was in the Army Air Corp in Tennessee during WWII before going overseas, and they talked about segregation there and how ridiculous it was and I always thought, well gee, I have got to go down there and see this for myself and I wound up going to Washington and Lee University Law School. When I got there, that first night there was gathering in the dormitory, the dormitory that is across from where the garage where Lee's horse Traveler had is last home.

TD: You were in Davis?

KS: That's it. The guys got together there and there were some undergraduates and they explained clearly that they had never had a nigger at the school and never would because if one ever showed up they would lynch him. I went "Gosh, this is something like my parents talked about." In any event the very next morning—the 5' 7", 120 pounds, Leslie Smith comes and he is the guy next door. And I said "Boy, I have got to stay next to this guy." I am not too big, I am 5' 8" and I was about 160 pounds. People didn't know how to act when he came. I mean the black people as well as the white people. In going into town, I remember coming back from town the first week, and the black men would always tip their hats to the college students who were always wearing coats and ties. They would say "Good morning sir, good morning sir, good morning sir," and when they got to Leslie they went "Good morning." They couldn't believe it. In any event there were a number of instances but for the most part, well he wasn't lynched and he was treated decently. For the most part I think, maybe not the majority, the majority thought he didn't belong, but were gentlemen to him. But a substantial minority thought that it was about time. I remember the very first week we were walking from the College Inn to Davis and one man who had been a waiter at the College Inn walked by and passed us. His name was Ted and he turned about and came back to us, and he said to Leslie, right to his face, "Is you that nigger boy that got into school?" Leslie was sort of shocked and went "Uh ah." He said, "Let me shake your hand I think it is about time, and I am proud to meet you." [Laughs] I said, "Leslie his heart is in the right place and it is going to take some time to get his mouth in the right place too." And Leslie said, "He is probably going over to his friends, the good ole boys, and tell them that he met me and all of that and think of himself as a liberal." [Laughs]

Les did very well at school. He was in the Order of the Coif and that sort of thing. He had gone to St. Paul's College, undergraduate school. He had never gone to school with white people before. Well I thought this whole thing was incredible. And yet, I get down there and things

have changed; they changed that year. All the schools in Lexington were integrated and I said, "Gee, I came down here to see what segregation was like because I couldn't believe it, and I get down here and they are integrated." And Leslie's solution was "Let's go back to segregation so you could see what it is like." [Laughs] I said, "Yeah, I think that would be...." He asked "Would that make you happy?"

TD: Well it sounds like he had a real sense of humor.

KS: Oh yes he was so funny but mostly he was just so nice. He was one of the nicest persons I have ever met. As far as class went, there was one instance, I remember we went to a party and one couple left when Leslie showed up. Lo and behold, the law student was a young man from the same town Leslie came from—Suffolk. Actually, Leslie was from Chuckatuck, which is now a part of Suffolk just outside of Norfolk. That was sad. Also I remember, we are sitting at the cafeteria that is next to Davis,

TD: Evans Dining Hall.

KS: And they sort of had bench seats, three on each side. Les is sitting across from me on one side and then I remember Barney [another law student] was on the other side of the table and the far side from me. Along comes Steve, the bigot in the class, and the only place open to put his tray down was next to Leslie. So Steve sat at the far side. Then Barney comes over and says to Steve "Would you move over next to Leslie, I want to eat." And Steve just ignores him and he says, "For God's sake Steve, why don't you just move over so I can put...." and everybody starts laughing including Leslie, and Barney still doesn't get it, and says, "For heaven's sake Steve, what is wrong with you. Why don't you just move over so I can sit down and eat my lunch." And just everybody cracked up. So Steve slowly sort of nudges over, it was a riot, and everybody was laughing at him. Les was just wonderful. Les was the best man at my wedding and the best friend I ever had. And he was just a nice wonderful person. He was murdered.

TD: I have heard about the murder. Was that an anonymous murder too?

KS: Somebody who knew him. And when I spoke to the police they said they didn't have any physical evidence. I think it might have been [omitted by Ted DeLaney]. The first summer he went to work for Senator Spong, and he was the first black to work in a United States Senator from Virginia's office. Then the second summer he worked for a high priced law firm in Washington. But when he got out he went to work for the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division and I think he was just a perfect choice because... (Interruption in telephone conversation)

TD: What years would those be?

KS: We started law school in September 1966 and graduated in June 1969.

TD: But his years at the Justice Department Civil Rights Division?

KS: He would have started at 1969 and I think he worked there for about 3 years before he was killed. I think what he was doing was just going around the country, to Federal Court, where all of these School Boards had excuses as to why they couldn't integrate. You know, "it was too expensive or what not" or "they just couldn't do this now." Whatever their excuses were and Les was such a nice guy and he would sympathize with them, I am sure, in court and say the problem is that you have to integrate now and this can't be put off. Your choices are you either have to do the job yourself or we will be happy to come in, the Justice Department, and do it for you." I am sure he would say it in such a nice way, that they would prefer to do it themselves, you know, in a manner that was satisfactory to the Justice Department rather than have the Justice Department do it for them. And so, he would go from city to city, and I am sure he was very successful in having the school systems integrated throughout the South.

TD: That is an interesting relationship that you had and certainly at a very, very troublesome time in United States history anyway.

KS: Right. I didn't do it because I wanted to for historical reasons, I did it simply because that was the way I was growing up. I wasn't trying to be a hero or anything, it is just the way it was. Some people thought it was strange me having a black best man at my wedding, but he was my best friend and I wouldn't think of having anybody else.

TD: Human relationships fortunately transcend race, and that's a very important reality. Well things have certainly changed here. My son had an absolutely splendid experience in the Law School here. He was in the class of 2003. Last year he clerked on the 6<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals. He clerked for one of the Bush judges, who was easily confirmed when he was the new President, who I think is a moderate Republican, because he knew my son's politics, and hired him anyhow. He had a great year with that judge, but he is now with Jenner and Block in Chicago. His experiences in the law school were extremely rich and the law school is very, very different—I think two of his best friends in the law school were actually Asian. There was just a wide assortment of people in the law school when he was there and just loved every minute of it.

KS: Wow, I was bored for the most part living in a small town. Being friends with Leslie helped liven it up.

TD: Well it wasn't such a problem for him because he was born and reared here except he actually finished high school in Rochester, New York. It wasn't a boring thing for him. In fact, there is a lot more to do in Lexington then there was when you were at Law School because there are hang-outs downtown where law students go to party. There are bars.

KS: I remember in my time there were two movie theaters. One was a dirty one. The VMI Cadets would go to the dirty one after church every Sunday and pack the place. They had a traffic light in town and people would go watch the traffic. There wasn't much more to do. The second year we lived on Massie Street, 201.

TD: I know Massie Street well.

KS: We had a little problem finding an apartment.

TD: So you had to go to the black neighborhood.

KS: Yes. Because people, it is not that they were mean, they just didn't know what they were suppose to do because they hadn't had this come up before. The things about Les at the time, one of the instructors was Mr. McDowell. He was there from the Depression when he asked his boss "Does this mean I am fired?," and his boss said, "No, just means I can't pay you." So he became a teacher. His wife, Mrs. McDowell, was the secretary of the Law School.

TD: I knew Mrs. McDowell.

KS: I remember when I called and got my application for admission and she said to me, "Well just hold on and I will go fetch it for you." And she was doll. The whole McDowell family treated Leslie like a son. Charlie McDowell would do the same lecture each year. He had his thing, he would have a script and would tell the same jokes each year. Fortunately he could not tell the nigger jokes anymore because out of respect for Leslie. So he changed it to a Chinaman. But the McDowell family frequently had Leslie over for dinner. Their son Charlie worked on the Richmond Times. They were very good to him. The last year, the Chancelor of the University—whose name I forgot—and the head of the Law School went with Les and two other law students, to black colleges to try to recruit black students around Virginia, but they weren't successful. The few students that were interested in going to Washington and Lee did not have the academic credentials to really make it there. And Les thought it would be a mistake to take them because they were just welcoming trouble. The kids wouldn't make it in school because they didn't have good enough academic background. I don't know when it was when the next black student came. There was a fellow I met last year who sells real estate in Fairfax, Virginia, who was a black student at Washington and Lee.

TD: What was his name?

KS: I don't remember his name. The thing is I talked with him, and almost all the time I talk about these things I start crying.

TD: Was his name Dennis Haston?

KS: I think so.

TD: He would have entered in 1966 and only stayed for one year.

KS: No, that year there was one undergraduate black and he didn't stay. This fellow had a another name, and he was several years later. I just forgot his name and so often when I talk about this I start crying. I went to see Les's mom and dad about 10 years ago with my family, and my kids never saw me cry so much. I just don't seem to control myself most of the time when I think about it. I just miss such a good friend.

TD: Well that is certain understandable and if weren't so hung up on male and females roles in our society you wouldn't worry about whether you were crying or not.

KS: Maybe.

TD: In any case I can certainly understand the anguish and the grief you feel for the loss of a friend, and your children will eventually understand that too.

KS: Well to tell you, I really don't understand it because I lost my mom and dad, they were both 45 when they died. I don't just break up into tears about them. I had a divorce when I was 30 years old and the only thing that really causes me to fall apart is talking about Leslie. And here I am talking to you and doing a pretty good job of staying in control.

TD: That is probably because we are not face to face.

KS: Probably.

TD: So did you remarry?

KS: Yes, I remarried and my son is graduating from the University of Virginia Medical School and he made the Honor's Society and will be going to Cornell Hospital in Manhattan. My younger boy just got a fantastic job with A.C. Nielson. He is graduating with a Master's Degree in econometrics, a combination of economics and ...

TD: Unfortunately there are people who are using econometrics for history.

KS: Well I love history.

TD: Well I do too.

KS: I can't understand his books. In any event, yesterday was his first day of work. He got this tremendous job with Nielson and he is working on their Kraft Foods account. Specifically they do one of the—let's see it is part Starbucks and part Maxwell Coffee. So my two younger boys are doing great. My daughter went to Berkeley and Columbia to teach and she spent 9 years teaching at Wilson High School in the District of Columbia, and then she got married and now she has a 9 month old baby that is gorgeous. And then my older boy went to Michigan to study Engineering but he was more interested in the football team and the basketball team. The basketball team was National Champions his freshman year and then he was interested in Fraternity parties, girls and beer, and he flunked out after 3 years. But he wound up the last 12 years he has been working for ESPN covering international soccer. His brothers are jealous because they are going to have to work for a living, and the brother just travels around and does soccer games for ESPN.

TD: Well it must be nice.

KS: Yes. He is going to Denver, Albuquerque, Mexico City and Turkey just within the next month or two.

TD: Well that's great.

KS: So things have worked out for all four of my children and with my marriage. I don't practice law anymore. I sell real estate, I enjoy that a lot more. So things have really worked out for me and still the memory of Leslie haunts me.

TD: Well that is part of who you were and who you are and even though that memory haunts you there is obviously a joy in it too. So that is what is important. But I am going to have to excuse myself because I have a 3:00 appointment.

KS: It was wonderful talking to you.

TD: It was wonderful talking to you and thank you so much for telling me the story of Leslie Smith. That is a very important.

KS: Maybe I will be down in Lexington sometime.

TD: Well if you do come to Lexington make sure you get in touch with me and maybe we could at least have lunch.

# W & L Lawyer



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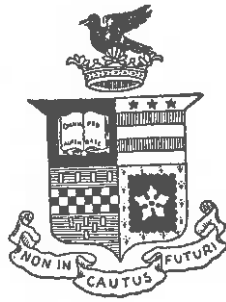
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*Commencement Exercises*

FRIDAY, JUNE THE SIXTH

NINETEEN HUNDRED AND SIXTY-NINE



THE CAMPUS

LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA

1972 CALYX



Leslie D. Smith was the first black graduate of the law school. Twenty-six years old and an attorney in the civil rights division of the Justice Department, he was found mysteriously stabbed to death in his Washington, D.C. apartment last summer. No one knows why.

### A Brother of Mine

Death is the ultimate fate of all mortals, but many live in afterdeath, through their dreams and goals, that they sought to establish in life, and in the hearts of those who hail them dear.

This is not an attempt to immortalize Leslie, so his name can long be remembered. Surely he was a brother, who can not be replaced in the hearts of my family, because we loved him dearly. There is no need to put emphasis on his past achievements, but there is a need to look at his attitudes toward life, especially here in America. His beliefs will yield greater value to us, through the recognition of his achievements.

Leslie believed in America, not as it exists today, with its racial injustice, but as a place where every man could obtain his fullest freedom and be truly liberated. He saw hope for a country torn by racial strife; where freedom is genocide, and war is honor. He wanted peace and harmony to prevail, so that every man could be called a friend, whether he be Black or White. He did not let the racial discrimination that he experienced in the peanut fields of "Mr. Charley" as a child influence him with hatred. Nor did he complain about the fact that he was "bused" over fifteen miles away from home to an all Black high school, while he only lived fifteen yards from another school, but that school was all White. No one screamed about "busing" Leslie, and other Black children at that time, because it was for segregation.

The system provides unequal education for Blacks. Today let me mention "busing" and the outcries against it could almost shatter eardrums. Why, because it means providing an equal and top quality education for Blacks. An education that Leslie was denied, but fortunately he overcame his systematically imposed handicap! Leslie believed that true freedom for Blacks could not exist until they were provided with the highest quality of education possible. He believed that this could not come about until the laws of the land be enforced to the fullest extent. The laws that are based on the belief "that all men are created equal."

Leslie believed that this country had the potential to become the greatest nation ever, if only the racial prejudices that are now institutionalized could be overcome. He worked within the system, the very same system that discriminated against him. He saw hope that the system could be reformed. Many of us Blacks see differently.

Leslie's death was not only a loss to my family, or the Black's, but a loss to the country as a whole. His thoughts, beliefs, and dreams were shared by many other young extinguished Black men who were struck down before they could reach the glory of their life. Let me say again that there are many other Blacks who believe differently. Let us pray for America's sake, that his thoughts, his belief and his dreams did not die with him.

-Bobby R. Smith '74

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