

Oxford attorney chose law career instead of journalism, teaching

LYNN LOFTON
MBJ Contributing Writer



Rhea Tannehill

Oxford attorney and past president of the Mississippi Bar Young Lawyers Division Rhea Tannehill could have taken other career paths instead of law. He grew up in the small Newton County town of Union where his dad was editor of a weekly newspaper, *The Union Appeal*. But Tannehill did not choose a journalism career.

He had a passion for teaching and earned undergraduate and master's degrees in education from Ole Miss. "I realized I couldn't make a living in education, but doing some substitute teaching was an eye opener and gave me some great perspective," he says.

But the legal profession was calling and he decided that was the route he should take. He believes it stems from his participation in mock trial competitions during high school. A program sponsored by the Mississippi Bar for 25 years, Tannehill sees the experience as great times. Their team always made it to the state competition.

"We had one lawyer in town, Rex Gordon, and he coached us for the trial competition, along with our teacher Jackie Richardson," he says. "The first year I was a witness, and the second year I was an attorney on the team. That gave me a taste of what it would be like. We were on our own, jousting verbally with other students."

Tannehill, 37, graduated from law school at Ole Miss in 1996 and clerked for the Tollison law firm in Oxford, an experience he enjoyed. Always fascinated by politics and lawmakers, he considered going to Washington after graduation.

"I spent two summers there as a Senate page and as an intern and loved it," he says, "but I got this job clerking and never looked back."

In 2003 he hung out his own shingle and is what he calls a small-town general practice lawyer. "That means I do anything that walks through the door; anything to pay the bills," he says.

Jay Carmean became his partner in January 2004, and today the firm of Tannehill & Carmean has three full-time attorneys and one part-time attorney along with six full-time staff members and three part-timers.

"There is nothing more rewarding than helping someone with a problem," Tannehill says about his profession. "A wise lawyer told me that the biggest compliment a lawyer can get is someone coming to him for help," he says. "The adversarial nature of law sometimes gets to be old and stressful. Arguing gets tiresome. Even though we might be friends with other lawyers, we have to argue with them."

He feels the public is sometimes misinformed about trial lawyers and think of them only as lawyers who run billboard and television ads. "My firm does not do that, but I don't think it's any different from anyone else running ads," he says. "A lot of people don't know a lawyer to call and the ads, although some are not tasteful, serve that purpose."

It's also a profession with a high stress level. "We have to work hard at managing life's priorities," he says.

"We can't walk out of the door and forget about work."

This lawyer finds release from the stress of the legal profession by spending time with his family and serving in the Mississippi National Guard. Now a major, he's been in the Guard for 15 years.

"Some people hunt and fish, but I enjoy serving in the National Guard," he says.

The family consists of his wife of 14 years, Robyn, and their three children, Maggie, seven, Jack, four, and Molly Catherine, three.

"I'm really a workaholic, so I spend my free time with my family rather than doing other things. They are my hobbies," he says. "We all like going to the Neshoba County Fair. I've missed only a couple in my life, and now my kids are at the stage where they really enjoy it."

Tannehill is never far from his roots and brings that philosophy to his legal practice. "I grew up in a rural area, went to public schools and get along with all segments and socio-economic groups," he says. "I didn't appreciate all of that growing up the way I do now."

Other influences in those early days in Union included his parents, Jack Rhea Tannehill Sr. and Jane Johnson now of Laurel; a junior high school coach, Burl Johnson; and his high school baseball coach, Tom Johnson. Later, a college friend, Sparky Reardon, was also a positive influence.

"If I were not a lawyer, I would be a high school baseball coach," he says. "They have the opportunity to influence many students, and I respected what my coaches said."

Contact MBJ contributing writer Lynn Lofton at llofton656@aol.com.