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TRIBUTE

A TRIBUTE TO BOB RAVITZ

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“We can hear you pretty well, Mr. Ravitz.”¹

Anyone who spent even a small amount of time with Oklahoma County Public Defender Robert A. “Bob” Ravitz understands why the quoted words above from Chief Justice William Rehnquist were so fitting. The Boss, which is how I have always and will always refer to Ravitz, was arguing before the High Court in the case of *Cooper v. Oklahoma*, which challenged Oklahoma’s unconstitutional standard for determining when a criminal defendant was too incompetent to be tried. While *Cooper* was not a high-profile case, the case argued immediately before it, *United States v. Virginia*, was a high-profile case involving the Virginia Military Institute’s admission (or non-admission) of women, that packed the surprisingly small Supreme Court Courtroom.

The *Cooper* argument began while the crowd that had gathered for the first argument vacated the courtroom. Accordingly, the Boss was speaking loudly over the den of the crowd. However, once the crowd had thinned, Ravitz’s voice reverberated through the courtroom prompting the Chief Justice to comment. If you knew, ever met, or were ever in proximity to

1. Comment of Chief Justice William Rehnquist, Oral Argument at 4:11, *Cooper v. Oklahoma*, 517 U.S. 348 (1996) (No. 95-5207) <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1995/95-5207> [<https://perma.cc/8885-K6UP>].

Ravitz, you know that he had a huge voice. It was a voice that spoke for thousands of indigent defendants over the years who could not speak for themselves. In my time knowing him, I also know that the only about Ravitz that was bigger than his voice, was the size of his heart.

I became acquainted with Bob Ravitz during the previous summer when I, as a rising 3L, was hired to work on the *Cooper v. Oklahoma* brief. That was the beginning of my public defender career that lasted the better part of twenty-three years. The months that followed were frightening, anxiety-filled and tense, but the unanimous opinion that followed on April 16, 1996, made the nail-biting months that preceded it worth the while. I assume, without having ever talked about it with him, that the *Cooper* case was the crown jewel in Ravitz's career. However, it was by no means the only jewel.

The Boss became the boss as the Chief Public Defender for Oklahoma County in 1987 taking over an office staffed with just a handful of attorneys and around the same number of staff. Today the office is comprised of approximately forty-five attorneys and fifteen support staff between the downtown and juvenile offices. In the years in between, hundreds of attorneys passed through the halls of the Public Defender's Office mentored by the Boss and for whom he was a formative influence. There was nobody better as a mentor or teaching client-focused defense, even years before that term was coined. While managing public defenders, who tend to be a bit antiauthoritarian, can be like herding kittens, there was never any question who was in charge, or what his position was on any given situation. Again, his large voice often helped him get his point across—especially at his Noon on Friday staff meetings.

The Boss was for many years a regular at the capital advocating for meaningful criminal justice reform before it was popular cause. He was a tireless voice against the death penalty in Oklahoma and won numerous capital cases both at trial and on appeal. He was one of the few attorneys I have ever known who was equally comfortable before a jury or an appellate court. His innate understanding of both stages of the system made him uniquely tailored for the job of Chief Public Defender.

Ravitz was the recipient of the Oklahoma Criminal Defense Lawyers' Association's Clarence Darrow Award in 1996 for his handling of the *Cooper* case in front of the United States Supreme Court. He also received the Angie Debo Civil Liberties Award for his contributions to civil liberties in 1985. In 2001, Ravitz was awarded the Barry Albert Award and, more recently, the Opio Toure Champion of Justice Award.

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While he was proud of these awards, many of which were displayed on the walls and shelves of his office, I have to think he was even prouder of the office that he created and the smaller day to day contributions he made in his endless pursuit of justice. It is that spirit of fighting for the people who cannot fight for themselves that will really be his lasting legacy—and that voice.