



2009

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Recommended Citation

Corinna Chandler, *Meeting Mr. Tasby*, 62 SMU L. Rev. 1685 (2009)
<https://scholar.smu.edu/smulr/vol62/iss5/7>

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MEETING MR. TASBY

Corinna Chandler

ON February 20, 2009, Professor Maureen Armour, a fellow law student, and I had an opportunity to meet Mr. Sam Tasby, a sharecropper's son from Arkansas, whose courage would change the face of Dallas. In 1970, he bravely stood up to fight for equality in education, but his dedication to improving our world didn't start in the Dallas court system.

Our interview took place in Mr. Tasby's home, where he has lived for the past fifty-five years, since shortly after he returned from military service in WWII. This eighty-seven year-old veteran has spent his life trying to make our world a better place, both in the European theater of World War II and later right here in Dallas, where he led the battle for equality in education. He is the epitome of the "Great Generation," overcoming many hardships to ensure a better life for later generations without complaining about his plight. We owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. Tasby for recognizing a wrong and investing over thirty years of his life seeking to correct it. We should all learn from the example of Mr. Tasby and judges like Judge Sanders, who willingly faced criticism and hostility in furtherance of social justice.

Following the *Brown*¹ decision in 1955, Mr. Tasby thought school districts would obey the Supreme Court's ruling since we live in a country that "believe[s] in following the law." But change certainly didn't take place as fast as Mr. Tasby had hoped. His children still attended a segregated school in 1970. Not only did this mean that the quality of their education was inferior to that of their white counterparts, but Mr. Tasby's children even had to commute past nearby white schools to attend their segregated school. By 1970, when only his two youngest children remained in Dallas Independent School District (DISD) schools, Mr. Tasby decided he had waited long enough on the school district to voluntarily obey the Supreme Court's ruling. That year, assisted by his attorney, Ed Cloutman, Mr. Tasby filed a lawsuit seeking integration of DISD schools.

Mr. Tasby did not seek integration of public schools for the sake of integration itself, but to ensure that his children would receive the same education afforded to white children. He elaborated that we send our soldiers "all over the world" to bring democracy to other countries, so we should at least have democracy here at home. And providing one system for the black children and another for the white children doesn't much

1. *Brown v. Bd. of Educ.*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955).

resemble democracy. He also felt that integration would be “good for the whole city,” not merely for the schools, because if people got to know each other and “socialize[d] with one another, [they would] have a better understanding of each other.”²

Going to court for the first time was a bit intimidating, given the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas and the community’s outrage about asking black and white students to go to school together. The case caused such outrage, in fact, that people picketed outside of the courthouse on a daily basis, forcing Mr. Tasby to walk past an angry crowd whenever he attended hearings. Mr. Tasby assured us that he had no personal confrontations with individuals who opposed his efforts, but he was aware of threatening telephone calls to his home. Unfortunately, his wife and children were usually home to answer the telephone while he was at work, but they rarely shared that information with him. He also occasionally overheard remarks by people at the local barber shop, for example, criticizing his actions without realizing he was present.

Mr. Tasby faced opposition not only from the white community, but also from minorities. Members of the Black Coalition, for instance, intervened in the *Tasby* litigation to oppose integration of DISD because they were satisfied with the status quo. The lawsuit also cost him his job with a Dallas plumbing company. After hearing about the *Tasby* litigation, his employer called him “an old instigator” and fired him. Mr. Tasby subsequently got a job with another plumbing company and eventually became a taxi driver, which allowed greater scheduling flexibility so that he could attend court hearings.

Mr. Tasby still remembers his first hearing with Judge Sanders in 1981 and believes that Judge Sanders “was really as fair as he could be” throughout the *Tasby* litigation. Judge Sanders’ courtroom provided an atmosphere in which the *Tasby* plaintiffs could freely tell their story. Mr. Tasby also explained that Judge Sanders gave the plaintiffs a chance to improve the school district by keeping the case in court for so many years. On several occasions, when Mr. Tasby had an opportunity to speak with Judge Sanders, the Judge would offer encouraging words to reassure him that he was “doing the right thing.”

During court hearings, Judge Sanders sometimes asked Mr. Tasby his own questions to seek additional clarification. Judge Sanders always treated litigants respectfully during the *Tasby* hearings. Mr. Tasby recalls that he got along well with Judge Sanders and that the judge “carried himself in [such] a manner that you couldn’t help but to respect him.” In recent years, an event at the Belo mansion offered Mr. Tasby an opportunity to meet Judge Sanders outside of the courtroom. Judge Sanders presented him with a personal gift on this occasion, and even sent Christmas cards to Mr. Tasby’s home.

2. Interview with Sam Tasby, Plaintiff, *Tasby v. DISD*, in Dallas, Tex. (Feb. 20, 2009).

Mr. Tasby agreed with many of Judge Sanders's integration solutions. Once his children attended integrated schools he did not notice a pattern of segregating black children within those schools, but Mr. Tasby did hear of such complaints from other black parents. Mr. Tasby did, however, disagree with Judge Sanders when the judge released DISD from court supervision in 2003, but this mild mannered man doesn't express frustration even at this decision. The *Tasby* plaintiffs had hoped that DISD could continue to improve its education system under judicial oversight, but without such oversight it would be hard to keep DISD moving in the right direction to ensure an equally high quality education for all DISD students.

Quite understandably, Mr. Tasby describes the litigation experience as occasionally tiring and financially draining, particularly due to the amount of time he was forced to take off work, but it was a sacrifice he doesn't regret.

Aside from our discussion about the *Tasby* litigation, we also had a chance to talk about current events. Mr. Tasby shared some pointed insight on the current state of the economy, remarking that the financial crisis and increased unemployment figures can be attributed to greedy individuals who refuse to share scarce resources although there is plenty for everyone. He also expressed excitement about the election of Barack Obama and hopes that the new President will help improve society, and race relations in particular, but warns that President Obama cannot magically change everything and will need the nation's help.

While Mr. Tasby acknowledges that race discrimination has become less invidious and less prevalent, he reminds us that it certainly still exists, leaving work to be done. All of his children and grandchildren were raised in Dallas and educated by DISD. Although the district is better now, Mr. Tasby says it is not yet fully integrated, but he attributes this to white flight to the suburbs rather than intentional discrimination on the part of the district and is hopeful that this too will change in coming years, as many white families move back to Dallas.

Mr. Tasby's relationship with DISD has not yet come to an end. One of his granddaughters is now employed by DISD and DISD has named one of its middle schools after him: Sam Tasby Middle School. This is just one of many recognitions and awards bestowed upon Mr. Tasby due to his fight for social justice. He is, of course, pleased that the district has decided to recognize his achievements and hopes that his example will encourage others to take actions that improve society.

Mr. Tasby had no idea his lawsuit would take thirty years to resolve, but he wanted to see a change in society and was glad to do anything he could to help that along. He believes in treating all men in a fair and just manner, so even in hindsight he would have filed the suit, realizing the backlash he would face from the Dallas community and that he would remain engaged in court battles for over thirty years. After bravely serving over two years in the Army during the European battles of World

War II and later facing picketers, retaliation, and threats, as he fought for social justice in education, Mr. Tasby still wishes he could have done more. He is hopeful that future generations will be inspired to continue his efforts to make a positive change. We certainly left our meeting with Mr. Tasby energized to continue the fight for social reform he started many years ago.