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The Real Man Behind the Robe

BY MARIA F. MACKAY

The tension in the courtroom was palpable. The elegance of the room only added to the solemnity in the air. The wood-paneled walls displaying portraits of former chief justices framed the room, packed with people waiting for the hearing to begin. The American and Georgia flags adorned each corner, like soldiers protecting the justice proclaimed. The silence ended when the sound of a gavel echoed throughout the courtroom, giving way to a procession of nine justices dressed in black robes who took their assigned seats behind the bench. Throughout the proceedings Justice Harold Melton remained quiet and focused, concentrating on the matter before him.

We first met many years ago during college, so I was familiar with part of his life. Harold David Melton was born on Sept. 25, 1966, in Washington, D.C., and grew up in Marietta. He received his undergraduate degree from Auburn University, where he became the first black



PHOTO PROVIDED BY CHIEF JUSTICE HAROLD D. MELTON

A husband, a father, a mentor, and now the Supreme Court of Georgia's newest chief justice. (Left to right) The Melton Family: David, Kimberly, Julian, Chief Justice Melton and Lauren.

student in the history of the university to be elected president of the Student Government Association. He went on to earn a law degree from the University of Georgia School of Law. He began his professional life in the Georgia Attorney General's office, where he worked for 11 years. In 2002, Justice Melton left to serve as executive counsel to then-Gov. Sonny Perdue. Three years later, Gov. Perdue appointed him to fill the vacancy on the bench created by the retirement of Justice Norman Fletcher. His reason, "Harold Melton embodies the conservative values that I believe will best serve the state of Georgia on the Supreme Court."

My mind raced back in time to those college memories we shared of Bible studies, Pictionary parties, bowling nights and football games as members of Campus Crusade for Christ. I knew that he had accomplished a lot for his age, but I wondered: Who is the real man behind the robe? I hoped my visit with him would answer that question.

Justice Melton's assistant escorted me to his office, which shone some light into his world. I scoured the walls, covered with his diplomas, achievement awards and pictures. Among the numerous photographs were one with the governor and one with the president. The rest were with family.

I heard footsteps coming down the hall from his office. I walked to the doorway to find out who it was and saw him, tall and thin, his step unhurried but confident, his brown eyes exuding sincerity and his face framed with a warm smile.

Our conversation went smoothly and it felt as if time had never passed. He told me about his lovely wife, his three wonderful children and his faith in God. He spoke of his love for the people he works with and how he loves cases dealing with, "interpreting and trying to give life to some aspect of our Constitution." He believes that a judge makes very important decisions that shape people's lives throughout the state. He

declared, “I have an obligation to be responsible, to be faithful to the task that I’ve been allowed and blessed to be able to enjoy.”

Justice Melton is also involved in shaping lives outside the courtroom. Since his college years he has poured his life into the lives of young people through youth ministries such as Young Life Ministries and Atlanta Youth Academies, as well as the Teen Ministry at Southwest Christian Fellowship Church.

However, Justice Melton’s greatest endeavor is trying to be a nurturing husband and father. The highlight of his day is when he gets to take off that robe and go home to his family. His greatest joy comes from playing outside on a beautiful afternoon with his children, grilling on his treasured Big Green Egg or attending his children’s sports events. At the end of the day, the man who was the first Georgia justice to be appointed by a Republican in 137 years, puts his children to bed, reads a devotional by John Piper and turns out the light. Finally, Harold Melton prays for God to give him the wisdom he needs to carry on the many responsibilities he has been assigned, that of a husband, a father, a mentor, and now the Supreme Court of Georgia’s newest chief justice. Clearly, the man behind the robe is a man changing lives at many levels, both inside the courtroom and out. It’s a privilege and an honor to also be able to call him my friend. ●

Editor’s Note: Justice Harold D. Melton was sworn in as chief justice on Sept. 4, 2018, by Chief Justice P. Harris Hines (retired).

“I have an obligation to be responsible, to be faithful to the task that I’ve been allowed and blessed to be able to enjoy.”
—Chief Justice Harold D. Melton



Maria Mackay is a certified legal interpreter and a member of the Chief Justice’s Commission on Professionalism.