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Walter H. Beckham Jr., attorney and law professor, dies at 91

BY ELINOR J. BRECHER
ebrecher@MiamiHerald.com



Walter H. Beckham Jr.

Walter Hull Beckham Jr. practiced law in Miami for more than half a century, and for much of that time imparted his wisdom to students at the University of Miami law school.

He taught torts and medical-legal trial tactics, established the school's civil trial advocacy course and founded its Medical Institute for Attorneys.

But he used to say that there was one thing no one could teach a trial lawyer, former partner Aaron Podhurst recalled after Beckham's death at age 91 on Tuesday: "Smarts. He said that before you go off and start yelling, you'd better learn the law."

A courtly Southern gentleman and devout Methodist who seldom raised his voice, much less yelled, Beckham was born on April 18, 1920, in Albany, Ga.

Five years later, his family moved to Miami, where his father, Walter Hull Beckham Sr., served as judge in the old Dade County Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court, and his mother, Clara Marshall Beckham, led the Dade County Council PTA.

The University of Miami's charter was drafted in the elder Beckham's law office, said Beckham Jr.'s son, Walter H. Beckham III.

Beckham Jr. died at the family's summer home in Asheville, N.C., about a decade after being stricken with Lewy Body Dementia, his son said. He and his wife also kept an apartment on Key Biscayne.

A specialist in aviation and insurance law, Beckham "was one of the great icons of the legal profession," said Podhurst. "He was brilliant and ethical, and he raised the bar to the highest standards ever."

Among his honors: the 2004 William M. Hoveler Award from the Center for Ethics & Public Service at the University of Miami School of Law, and the 2009 Legal Legends Award from the Eleventh Judicial Circuit Historical Society.

Beckham met his future wife, Ethel Koger, at Ada Merritt Junior High School. Ethel Koger Beckham served on the Miami-Dade School Board for 16 years. An elementary school at 4702 SW 143rd Ct. bears her

name.

To help the family scrape by during the Great Depression, Beckham worked at Tanner's, one of Miami's early grocery stores, where he learned to cut meat.

"Once a year, until I was 12, Dad would have half a cow delivered, and he butchered it in the kitchen for himself and the neighbors," said Walter Beckham III, of Atlanta. "He'd freeze the meat. And we never had a house without fruit trees," a nod to Depression-era insecurity.

"In case things got bad, we'd have food if we needed it."

Beckham earned a bachelor's degree from Emory University in 1941, joined the U.S. Navy before the country entered World War II, then received a law degree at Harvard University in 1948.

The next year, he became one of the Florida Bar Association's 151 charter members. He served as secretary to the American Bar Association, and was a founding member of the National Board of Trial Advocacy, and the only non-judge to chair the National Judicial College.

He spent five years on active duty during the war, an experience that his son said profoundly affected him.

He retired from the Naval Reserve after 28 years as a captain.

Initially training for the Navy's supply corps, Beckham was sent into combat aboard the USS Portland, a heavy cruiser that survived the battles of Midway, Guadalcanal, the Eastern Solomon Islands, Santa Cruz and Coral Sea.

Returning to Florida, Beckham settled his young family in Coral Gables, began teaching at UM, and joined the firm of Dixon, DeJarnette and Bradford.

He later joined Nichols, Gaither & Green, then became of counsel to Podhurst Orseck, which Aaron Podhurst co-founded in 1967 after the Nichols firm disbanded.

He insisted that his family dine together every evening at 6:15, began each meal with a prayer, and taught adult Sunday school at Coral Gables First United Methodist Church.

"The room was always packed," his son said.

Beckham also loved to hunt, which he did all over the world, his son said: big game in Africa, and deer, quail and wild pigs on a leased, 15,000-acre spread east of Punta Gorda.

He taught at UM until 1982, led People to People "citizen ambassador" trips to Russia and China after the Cold War, and traveled to faraway places like New Guinea, sometimes by himself.

His law office, filled with imposing mahogany furniture, old English prints and Florida landscapes, suited his "very proper" persona, Podhurst said.

"People were a little intimidated," he added, "but he treated people in the office with total respect. .??. When we would travel on depositions, he'd unwind," delighting in taking his "Yankee" colleagues to hole-in-the-wall Southern barbecue joints.

He supported charities that helped children with disabilities, and, his family said, found inspiration in the M.A. Purdy poem, I Dare You.

"I dare you to give to those in need, to share your strength and your time, for in giving and sharing you gain

new hope for the world and all mankind,” it reads in part. “I dare you to always live your life so that others might catch a glow, and use your life as a beacon as through their life they go.”

In addition to his wife and son Walter, of Atlanta, Beckham is survived by another son, James, of Coral Gables, daughter Dr. Barbara DeLeo of Asheville, five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

A memorial service is planned for 10 a.m. Tuesday at the First United Methodist Church, 536 Coral Way, Coral Gables. Burial, in his Navy uniform, will follow at Woodlawn Memorial Gardens Cemetery North.

The family asked that instead of sending flowers, friends make memorial donations to the scholarship fund in Beckham’s name to assist South Florida judges in attending the National Judicial College in Reno, Nev.