

# **LARGER THAN LIFE: A Tribute to Tom Yeotis by John Streby**

In an era of rampant narcissism, the term "larger than life" typically denotes someone who cuts a wide swath, often with a lifestyle that is trendy, perhaps even brazen, and carried out in a notably immodest way. Flamboyance in dress and manner are common traits. The piano virtuoso Liberace was larger than life, as were Coach Woody Hayes and entertainer Michael Jackson. But those three, while much better known, lacked the character of the man depicted here.

Judge Thomas C. Yeotis, now retired for more than 20 years, and starting his tenth decade, exemplifies such largeness, but only in the most exemplary sense. Because a growing number of GCBA members are too young to have known him professionally, it is useful to elaborate on the aspects of his life that are most worthy of emulation.

I doubt that there is anyone alive in Genesee County who has touched more lives in a positive way than Tom Yeotis. In Municipal, Probate, and finally Circuit Court, he represented the human face of justice for troubled people facing divorce, eviction, prosecution, and other legal problems. Those who nervously stood in the dock found him to be a calm, unemotional but reassuring, compassionate man with a rare ability to cut to the essence of a situation.

The courthouse is a veritable soap opera, where the gamut of human tribulation is on constant display. Tom stood above the fray, content to not be the center of attention, and not allowing ego gratification guide his conduct. He has never craved adulation, nor aspired to be known as a legal scholar.

Yet he has an unerring degree of common sense, with an ability to reach the right result without obscuring his reasoning in a cloud of esoteric legal jargon. Tom is a generous man, as evidenced again and again by his frequent appearances at funeral services and visitations. He invariably brings his checkbook along and makes the appropriate donation.

Great men are often plagued by monumental flaws, as demonstrated among the presidents of the past 60 years. Vanity, greed, paranoia, bad judgment, partisanship, and pettiness top the list of presidential shortcomings. Although Tom never has taken himself too seriously, his work as both a trial court judge and a life force for community betterment was taken with the utmost seriousness. Lest I be accused of plagiarism, this distinction is borrowed from director-actor John Huston's stirring eulogy to Humphrey Bogart.

Yeotis is a big man. Except on the basketball court, where he was a fierce competitor in his amateur sports days, one cannot imagine him using his imposing height or athletic physicality to intimidate others, as some men his size are prone to do.

It would be extremely difficult to fully plume the scope and depth of Tom's life in anything less than a book-length work, and there are thousands of men of lesser virtue but greater notoriety who have had books written by or about them. I will do my best to hit the highlights of the life of this genuinely great man.

Among his prodigious accomplishments is his recognition, in the *Michigan Lawyers Weekly*, as one of Michigan's ten most-respected judges. During the course of his long career, he was given some 30 awards from a variety of professional, non-profit and community-based organizations. He was the founder of the Bruin Club, a fundraising vehicle for athletic scholarships and such things as baseball fields and electronic basketball scoreboards. Yeotis and other members of the Bruin Club founded the Greater Flint Sports Hall of Fame.

What stands out in the life and times of Tom Yeotis is that he has never sought the self-aggrandizement that seems to be an occupational hazard among the movers and shakers of the world. As described by MCC basketball coach Steve Schmidt, who Yeotis helped bring to Mott in 1991, "Judge Yeotis' unselfishness and generosity are second to none and he has done more behind the scenes than we will ever know. He is one-of-a-kind and there will never be another like him." Indeed. That opinion is shared by many who know him.

Tom and his wife Meg are the proud parents of Dean, Stephanie and Georgianne, as well as five grandchildren. Dean has carved his own niche in Flint as a successful employment lawyer and as the owner of three retail stores. I've observed fathers whose sons' accomplishments are quantified by income. But when Tom commented to me about his first-born, income was never mentioned; rather, his focus was on Dean's efforts at helping the underdog, as he did on behalf of numerous victims of sewer backups. Unlike a certain film producer who gained notoriety at Flint's expense, Dean stayed on here to develop Totem Books, an under-appreciated asset to the community. That Tom's son chose to keep his money and talent here is a testimonial to Dean Yeotis and to his parents.

Important to the lifeblood of every community are volunteer, non-profit organizations that administer programs, recognize worthy achievements, and raise money for deserving causes. Tom was one of the founders of the Liberty Bell Award as well as the Greater Flint Sports Hall of Fame. He has also served on the boards of dozens of non-profit entities, and such service is no hollow honorarium---unless you enjoy tedious meetings at inconvenient times, sleep-inducing reports and trivial chatter.

There are times when it takes more character to be responsible, rather than parsimonious,

with other peoples' money. Many years ago, a local attorney succeeded in an appeal only, after a heroic and time-consuming effort, based on the exclusion of evidence. For his efforts, Tom authorized a fee of \$10,000.00---an amount that likely triggered frantic protests from the other powers-that-be in the system. Tom stood his ground and the lawyer got paid what he deserved. But that wasn't the only time that he went to bat for assigned counsel. In 1979, his encouragement and willingness to participate resulted in the formation of a GCBA committee to address attorney fees paid to assigned counsel. During one meeting that included Tom and several other judges, he used mildly colorful language to debunk the resistance of some of them to a fee increase. I was impressed by his candor.

During his career on the bench, Judge Yeotis demonstrated an uncanny knack for getting to the heart of an issue with a few well-chosen words. The consistent thread here is candor mixed with compassion, framed in a way that would linger in the minds of those standing before the bar of justice. There are dozens of good examples, and here are my favorites:

*\*You sure are a prolific father, seven children, I don't know how you have the time to be a criminal.*

*\*I'm not sure if you're a bad guy, but you sure are a good liar.*

*\*When you quit school, it's like going into halftime three touchdowns behind, and trying to catch up.*

*\*I am not sure the Lord has a plan for you, but I sure do.*

*\*I just want to warn you that if you want to be a horse's ass, so can I. And I can be a bigger one than you.*

*\*This woman claims that her husband was too jealous while they were married -- then she admits to having a child with another man. No wonder the guy was jealous.*

*\*There aren't too many nice people in the criminal justice system. Most of the people that are in prison deserve to be there, and I think it's about time that you join them.*

We are a badly divided nation facing extraordinarily difficult times. The very legitimacy of many of our institutions is under relentless attack, and scandalous political rhetoric has become the new normal. It is easy to become cynical and hardboiled over these trends. But it is people like Tom Yeotis who provide a benchmark of rectitude and class, a demonstration of how unselfish men and women of decency, compassion and dedication can serve as a paean to civility and reason. If there is a better role model than that provided by Tom, I haven't seen it.

Thank you, Judge Tom, for all that you have given to your community. You are one of the few true giants, and speaking on my own behalf as well as the thousands of others who have benefitted in so many ways by your example, your community spirit, your wisdom, your character, you have done us all proud.