

On the U.S. Supreme Court is a Justice descended from West African slaves and born to a young mother, not more than 20, in segregated Georgia. Home was Pin Point, among the Gullah-Geechee and oysters and marshlands. His father left. And a fire took all he had and the shack where he lived.

He was sent to Savannah along with his brother. They lived in their mother's one-room tenement. Then, still just a child, taking all his belongings in a half-filled paper grocery bag, he went to live with his grandparents, Myers and Christine Anderson. It was the longest and most significant journey of his life. He and his brother flushed the indoor toilet every time they walked by. The kitchen refrigerator dazzled them.

His grandfather enrolled him in a Catholic school run by Irish nuns. It was a segregated school of only black children. The Klan marched through Savannah. And Forsyth Park was for whites only. During the summers, he sawed trees by hand and plowed behind a horse named Lizzie at his grandfather's farm—a farm owned since freedom came at long last to his family.

He chose the seminary to finish school, set on becoming a priest. He was at times the only black seminarian among a sea of white faces. Then came 1968. King was assassinated. Then Kennedy. It transformed him. He left behind hopes of the priesthood. He found Black Power. He wrote about revolution. He protested.

He went to law school. He became a father. He worked for legal aid. He saw forced busing and violence and insolence in South Boston. He devoted himself to doing better for his son.

He took the road less traveled. He went to work for Republican Jack Danforth in the middle of Missouri. It was his only job offer. Years later, he went to Washington, D.C. He joined the Reagan administration. He pulled at every thread of his country's founding and its history—a country that had simultaneously enslaved his ancestors while declaring "all men are created equal." He became a judge. And ultimately, a Justice.

This is the story of Justice Clarence Thomas. It is a story that should be told in every American classroom, at every American kitchen table, in every anthology of American dreams realized.

It is a story we've heard told from the man himself, for it is the story of our former boss. We are his former law clerks. We've had a front-row seat to the Justice at work. Justice Thomas is a man of greatest intellect, of greatest faith, and of greatest patriotism. We know because we lived it. He is a man of unwavering principle. He welcomes the lone dissent. He is also a man of great humor and warmth and generosity. Walk the halls, and you'll hear his laugh. Call, and he answers. His grandfather's sayings become our sayings. His chambers become our chambers—a place fueled by unstoppable curiosity and unreturned library books, all to get every case just right. Those chambers become a way station for other Justices' clerks too—a place where wisdom is freely shared by the man who made his way from Pin Point to the Supreme Court's marbled halls.

And yet, the stories most often told of Justice Thomas are not these. The Justice is ever the subject of political headlines taking aim at his character, his judicial philosophy, his marriage, even his race. They attempt to write over his actual story. Lately, the stories have questioned his integrity and his ethics for the friends he keeps. They bury the lede. These friends are not parties before him as a Justice of the Court. And these stories are malicious, perpetuating the ugly assumption that the Justice cannot think for himself. They are part of a larger attack on the Court and its legitimacy as an institution. The picture they paint of the Court and the man for whom we worked bears no resemblance to reality.

As his law clerks, we offer this response. Different paths led us to our year with Justice Thomas, and we have followed different paths since. But along the way, we all saw with our own eyes the same

thing: His integrity is unimpeachable. And his independence is unshakable, deeply rooted seven decades ago as that young child who walked through the door of his grandparents' house for a life forever changed.

Justice Thomas has never strayed from those beginnings. A bust of his grandfather—himself raised by a grandmother born into slavery—watches over his office. It is an ever-present reminder that he is no ordinary Justice. Come the first Monday in October, the Justice, born into poverty few can fathom and educated in a segregated Savannah school room, will take the bench and begin his thirty-third year on the U.S. Supreme Court. He will ask a question most haven't considered. And he will cast his votes and write opinions based on his mind alone.

We are proud to have been his clerks and to remain his friends, and we unequivocally reject attacks on his integrity, his character, or his ethics.

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