



A Tribute

Benson Wolman

Benson Wolman served as Executive Director of the ACLU of Ohio from 1969 to 1986, for 17 years.

It all started in the fifth grade when Benson complained to his mother about the prayers being said in school. By the time he reached high school, he was an inveterate trouble maker. When he saw the program for his high school graduation, Benson complained to the principal about the religious songs the choir would sing. He was told to put his concern in writing. That was Benson's first legal brief. At graduation three days later, the choir sang non-religious songs.

In 1969, he was a teaching associate at Ohio State University. At a meeting of the Ohio Board of ACLU in April, 1969, Benson was elected executive director of the affiliate. He was, at that time, chairperson of the Central Ohio Chapter and had been an ACLU lobbyist for four years.

He took office in July, 1969 and was learning the ins and outs of running a non-profit organization when, on May 4, 1970, a calamity hit Benson, the ACLU of Ohio, and the country: the killings at Kent State University by the Ohio National Guard.

It was, for Benson, an indoctrination by fire. The Kent Case, as it became known, went to the U.S. Supreme Court and lasted until 1979. Benson still displays in his office the letter of apology the ACLU of Ohio received from then Governor Rhodes.

When Benson became executive director of the ACLU of Ohio, it had a mailing list of approximately 4,000 names. When he retired 17 years later, the mailing list had doubled.

The growth of the organization can be attributed to many factors; Benson's eloquence was a major component. For 17 years Benson was the voice of the ACLU throughout the state. It goes farther than that. For 17 years, Benson Wolman was the ACLU of Ohio and the ACLU of Ohio was Benson Wolman.

When he spoke before various civic organizations that did not admit women, Benson asked, "Why not?" When he spoke to

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groups where there were no people of color, Benson asked, Why not? When he spoke to school groups, Benson urged the students to exercise their constitutional rights.

In the State Legislature, Benson was a well-known and respected lobbyist. Even those who opposed his views and the ACLU, respected Benson's eloquence, his outstanding ability to articulate issues of importance, and his steadfast devotion to civil liberty principles.

It was not always easy working with Benson. A series of affiliate presidents tried and tried and tried to get Benson to bring even a modicum of order to his desk. And all the presidents failed.

When Benson spoke to the board of directors of the affiliate, the delegates listened closely despite what was, at times, a lengthy explanation. Perhaps it wasn't the lengthy explanation but the pause at the end of his oration and then the, On the other hand, as he examined the other side of the question.

No one who worked with Benson during those 17 years will ever forget his quick, clever, and ready wit. When one state delegate reported that his chapter had a case involving non-rental of an apartment because of sex, Benson promptly asked, Too much or the wrong kind?

At an awards dinner where Madalyn Murray O Hair, a national atheist leader, was the speaker and Senator John Glenn, an elder in the Presbyterian Church, was an honoree, Benson introduced them, much to their delight, as, The God fearing and the God jeering.

When he retired as Executive Director in 1986, Benson did not retire from the ACLU of Ohio. Instead, he became the Ohio representative to the National Board of Directors. Although he has re-

tired from the National Board, he continues to serve on its National Advisory Council.

Now, as an attorney in private practice, Benson serves the ACLU as a cooperating attorney. He has retired from various positions with the ACLU but he will never retire from the ACLU.

Besides his eloquence and wit, Benson is known for his outstanding wine collection and his love of food. He has described himself as, a glutton and wino while masquerading as gourmet and connoisseur!

Space does not permit listing all the honors that Benson Wolman has received. Just a few include the Justice Harry Blackmun Bill of Rights award, an Anti-Defamation League citation, the Martin Luther King award, the Liberty Bell Award, and an award from the Society of Professional Journalists.

While he was Executive Director, the ACLU of Ohio received the Gold Medal award from the Freedom Foundation, a conservative organization, for developing the Ohio Mock Trial Program.

A life-long resident of Columbus, Benson Wolman is described as Columbus' oldest living resident native liberal.

Well done, Benson!