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Family and legal community mourn loss of attorney

By Tavia D. Green
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CLARKSVILLE, Tenn. When people think of Frank Jasper Runyon II, words like "gentleman" and "kind-hearted" flow from their hearts, mixed with a bit of sorrow at the thought of the respected attorney and spiritual family man's death.

Runyon, II, 83, died Wednesday Feb. 29, following a long illness. His family, friends and colleagues will always remember him as a man who was dedicated to God, his family and the judicial system of Clarksville-Montgomery County.

"He was such a good man, go-to guy, as a father. He loved his wife, family and church exceedingly," J. Runyon III, his son said. "He was a good man. He was a kind and gentle man who had the utmost ethical standards. He was very kind-hearted, loved being a lawyer ... being a gentleman was important to Dad.

"I recall Dad describing when an older lady at Immaculate Conception described her husband at his funeral by saying 'he never even said the word 'damn.' Dad was the same way. He did not curse, make small talk or gossip, or say bad things about anyone. I never heard my father say so much as a curse word. To the contrary, he led by example and pointed out to this children the recklessness of such behavior.

"Dad lived a life so that when his children think of 'fairness and integrity,' we think of Frank Runyon. Seemingly there are many, many people in the community who think of Frank Runyon in that way."

Runyon was born March 18, 1928 in Clarksville, the son of Charles Vineyard Runyon, also a respected attorney, and Dorothy Lardner Runyon. He attended Clarksville High School, graduated from the University of Virginia in 1950 and voluntarily joined the U.S. Navy.

"His brother and cousin had served in WWII and his father had served in WWI," son Raymond F. Runyon said. "He thought it was important; he was very proud of his service,"

Runyon became a lawyer in 1957 after graduating from Vanderbilt University Law School and practiced law at the family law firm, established in 1929 by his father, Charles Runyon Jr., and built its reputation for honesty, ethics and customer satisfaction on the simple principle that every client is important and that there are no barriers to the lengths the firm will go to in order to serve them.

Frank J. Runyon II lived by those principles.

"Dad was a consummate gentleman, he was always concerned, he was incredibly sympathetic and believed in people," Raymond F. Runyon, his son, said. "He always said you always had the right to trust people, because people are inherently good, and he believed in it. He believed in the power of the jury, the power of 12 people to come up with a decision. He believed it was inherent in our judicial system and we needed that safeguard.

"Every case was important to him, every person that walked through the door was important," Ray Runyon said. "He would give it his best. He was going to handle their problems and it was going to be okay."

Runyon served Clarksville as the city attorney from 1959 until 1991 and was legal counsel to the Clarksville Electric Power Board from 1959 until 2005.

"He very much enjoyed being a lawyer. I heard certain phrases, all of my life. Such as "when I cannot even see the other side of the case, that is a problem," indicating that a lawyer must have the ability to at least try to understand alternative theories of every case," J. Runyon III said. "When the push for lawyers to be allowed to advertise, came out in the 70s, Dad was totally against it. It is my belief that he feared it would cheapen the profession...He was a very active tort litigator throughout his career. As talks of tort reform increased over recent years he was of the strong opinion that only juries could really judge the value or lack thereof. He was very concerned about the rights of citizens being legislated away as a result of ill informed lobbying efforts."

Legal community remembers Runyon

Runyon was an attorney for more than 45 years and retired in 2005. He was actively involved in the legal community as a member of Tennessee State Bar, 1957, U.S. District Court, Middle District of Tennessee, U.S. Court of Appeals, Sixth Circuit, U.S. Supreme Court, former president of the Montgomery County Bar Association, the Tennessee Bar Association and Tennessee Bar Foundation.

Judge Ray Grimes said Runyon II had a personality that everyone liked.

"He was a great lawyer, a great friend and as a lawyer he was always well prepared," Grimes said. "He was one of the most well-organized lawyers I've ever known."

He was a hard worker..if you had a case against him as the opposing lawyer you knew you had your work cut out for you," Judge Grimes said. " Even after being in court with him all day long and going toe to toe with him he'd act like your best friend and he was. He was such a good friend. As a lawyer and judge I had so much respect for him as a person and his legal abilities."

Grimes said Runyon was also known for telling jokes. He had a keen sense of humor and loved making others smile. He was a father-figure and mentor to many attorneys-young and mature.

Retired local attorney Doug Parker said, "I started practicing in 1968 and Frank had been practicing a few years before. He was my mentor and a mentor to all the young lawyers and most of the old ones. He was outstanding, he would help you in any way you could."

Parker said as a new attorney he would watch for Frank J. Runyon II to go to the coffee shop then run to ask him advice. When he needed more advice he would watch for him to go to the coffee shop again.

"He was very helpful in every way. He was an excellent lawyer and would do anything he could to help you. His client came first and he was a tenacious lawyer in representing his client," Parker said. "He was one of the most true southern gentlemen I've ever known in any way. He was an all around top-notch human being and lawyer. He was a throwback of the old lawyers where they were real gentlemen in every way and he was a pleasure to practice law with and watch practice law. He could show you how law was to be practice..The community has lost a great person when they lost Frank."

Jack Mitchell, an attorney at the law firm of Cunningham, Mitchell and Rocconi, practiced law with Runyon for 47 years.

"He was an outstanding attorney and has been over the years," Mitchell said. "It's been a pleasure to practice law with him. I found him to be outstanding academically and in the courtroom. He exemplified himself as an attorney over these years. He is a person of integrity and has conducted himself in that matter at all times. He was a true gentleman and always conducted himself in the courtroom with civility, and I am proud to be associated with him for many years. I've considered him to be my friend and I am upset over this loss. Clarksville has lost a fine southern gentleman."

Albert P. Marks, who practices at Marks, Shell and Maness, worked alongside Runyon for decades as well.

"I have known him for a long time. I practiced with him 35 or 40 years and I found him to be a dedicated lawyer. He represented his clients well. He was a mannerly cordial person. He was just a good lawyer," Marks said. "As a fellow attorney, I think the fact he was an accomplished, thorough attorney who represented his clients well it's something I remember about him."

Larry Watson, local attorney at Watson & Atkins, said Runyon was a strong advocate for his clients and always well-prepared.

"He was very professional and had great demeanor. He and I tried a number of cases on opposite sides. I always found him to be a pleasure," Watson said. "Frank would be preferred to be known as a family man rather than a great lawyer. He had a knack for having kids that became lawyers, and the legacy lives on."

Family man

Runyon will not only be remembered as a community pillar, but as a spiritual man and a family man. All who knew him said his had a deep faith as a Catholic and a deep love for his family.

"He loved his church," Grimes said. "He was a good Catholic and Christian. He loved his wife and each and every one of his children. I feel fortunate that I have had the opportunity to know him as a friend and to work with him. He was so special ... you could not not like Frank Runyon. You just couldn't."

Raymond Runyon said his family knew his love for them and for his faith.

"He never forgot the teachings of his parents and the church said, J. Runyon III. "He was especially fond of St. Mary and reminded us often to give up our pains and struggles 'for the poor souls in purgatory.' I am certain he did the same in his last days."

Raymond Runyon said his father's faith continued strong until his last days.

"Until the very end, both family and his Catholic faith were foremost with Dad," Raymond Runyon said. "His faith in the church, in God was key."

Even at the very end when he wasn't saying anything it was. On Tuesday my sister asked him is there anything we can do for you, he said, 'pray'"

A celebration of his life will be held on Saturday, March 3 at Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, beginning at 11 a.m. The celebrant will be the Rev. Eric Fowlkes, assisted by Rev. Charles Matthew, Rev. Theophilus Ebulueme and Rev. David Gaffny.

Burial will follow in Greenwood Cemetery. Visitation will be at Neal-Tarpley-Parchman Funeral Home from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. on Friday and from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. on Saturday, March 3 at the funeral home. A rosary service will be held on Friday at 7 p.m., at the funeral home.
