

O. T. WELLS

By MARILYN V. AINSWORTH

OZRO THADDEUS WELLS, JR. — not exactly a commonplace name, not exactly a commonplace personality. From a distance, O. T. Wells appears a fun-loving, witty, cocky, often flamboyant man — an energetic attorney, constantly surrounded — seemingly guarded — by close friends. This public impression is complicated when one hears him speak, often quoting Bible passages in a manner characteristic of the Southern Black minister, or unabashedly acknowledging his deep devotion for his family. Any seeming contradiction is further highlighted when one engages him in serious private conversation where only occasional flashes of wit break through; the playfulness overcomes his concentration for an instant, then quickly retreats in favor of sobriety. The contrasting moods shift without incongruity. “O.T.” is an open man, sincere in his desire to expend the maximum amount of effort necessary to accomplish whatever tasks he faces, frank in his appraisal of any situation which arises. He readily voices well-formed attitudes and opinions on any subject that is broached, and displays a deep concern for issues that affect Black people in or out of the American legal system. Compassion for people is a recurring theme in any conversation with him. His devotion to his friends is legendary; to a person they proclaim him “one in a million, he’s always there when you need him.”

When in New York, he’s easily accessible to his clients as well as to his friends and fellow attorneys. Late callers to his office find him answering the telephone after everyone else has left for the day. Clients can readily identify the only *Wells, Ozro T.* in the Manhattan direc-

tory as the one they’ve been told they can reach whether the office is open or not. One such potential client called him away from Christmas dinner for an arraignment, and true to form, O.T. postponed his celebration until he had “taken care of business.”

O.T. WAS BORN in Pennsylvania into what is probably one of the few Black families moving from North to South during the forties. They moved to Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1941 where his father, a minister of the Church of God in Christ, was given the Bishopric of North Carolina. He received his elementary and high school education in the public schools in Greensboro and his strong religious training at home from his parents. Evidence of the influence of his parents and of the church in his life surfaces frequently in his conversation. At one time he considered going into the ministry, but abandoned that idea in favor of a desire to do something different. When asked why he chose the law he’ll quickly tell you that his mother wanted him to become a mortician, but when asked for an occupational preference in the seventh grade, he found he couldn’t spell it and scratched it out and wrote “lawyer” instead. Just as quickly shifting from the jest to the sober, he will very seriously reveal his true motives for choosing a legal career, revealing at the same time an awareness of himself that is somewhat unexpected. He admits to a fascination for people in the vocal professions. Analogies between the law and the ministry (probably the two most vocal professions) arise constantly; “a desire to help people,” “a

concern for social issues," "a vehicle for social change." As a boy, he read about the great trial lawyers and decided that law was "commensurate with my personality, a super outlet for my ego, and consistent with my desire for a bit of flamboyance." Observers, though, note that the ego and flamboyance do not appear at trial. There, O.T. relies on his imagination and a thorough knowledge of his case, as well as the applicable law.

O.T. chose to attend Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia for his undergraduate education. His decision was prompted by his contact with a recruiter from Morehouse who had at one time taught at his high school in Greensboro. While at Morehouse, O.T. met Charles Anderson, a Morehouse graduate and a member of the faculty at Boston University, who had come to speak at a fraternity function. Mr. Anderson had had a distinguished career at Boston University School of Law and once again O.T. was inspired to make a decision on the basis of a personal interaction. This interaction with individuals, beyond a superficial concern for what they are about, has not only led him to significant decisions but has served him well in his ability to become concerned with his clients' plights.

The choice of Boston University School of Law was prompted also by the times — law schools in the South were still segregated — and by the fact that O.T. wanted to move back to the North. During his first year in law school, he went to New York City in order to establish New York residency. Still motivated by his desire to accomplish some good for Black people, he reasoned that to do so in a metropolis the size of New York would be much more significant if he succeeded. Upon graduation from law school, he began to work with an attorney in New York but was soon drafted into the Army. He was offered a chance to qualify for the Judge Advocate General's Corps, but

declined in favor of a job as a weather observer. He realized that the longer the Army took to qualify and commission him for JAG, the farther he would be from establishing the kind of law practice that he wanted to have.

After the Army he clerked for a Wall Street Firm, Fink and Pavia, while awaiting the results of the bar, and subsequently for a number of Black attorneys in New York. He practiced as a junior partner to one Black attorney, William Chance, whom he considers his mentor in trial practice, for three years before going into practice for himself in Manhattan. His practice consists mostly of criminal defense work in major felony cases. Presently, he is attorney of record for Levi Valentine, one of the defendants in the case generally known as the "Rap Brown case." As such he is working on a team with two noted defenders of social justice, William Kunstler and Howard Moore. O.T. is a member of both the New York and Massachusetts bars. In addition to his interest in criminal law, O.T. is general counsel for the Church of God in Christ, the largest Black Pentecostal Church in the world.

ONE WOULD IMAGINE that his practice would consume so much of his time that he would be precluded from very many outside activities, but nothing could be further from reality. Attorney Wells wears other hats — Mr. President, head of the largest and oldest organization of Black attorneys in the United States, and Mr. Wells, proud husband and father.

By his own admission, his practice is presently continuing on its own momentum while he devotes a good portion of his energy to the activities of the National Bar Association. He characterizes his time with the Association, as 70% focused on the structure of the NBA, 25% reacting to or responding to issues that confront Black attorneys in particular and Black people in general, and 5% concerned with

the interplay between the two. Realizing that this particular mix leaves him relatively little room for work in what he calls the "quality areas of the bar," he emphasizes the necessity for building a structure on which future NBA administration can rely for smooth functioning and established program support. To this end, new permanent sections and standing committees have been formed. These groups have been staffed by attorneys and law students appointed by O.T. and generally have been given purpose and direction from him.

The greatest obstacle to the implementation of many of the plans and programs of new groups and existing groups is the perennial lack of available funds for operation. O.T. regrets this lack of money prevents the organization from reaching its full potential, but predicts that when the organization does get some money, there will be nothing holding it back. He speaks optimistically of that time and anticipates the ability of the NBA to respond immediately to whatever confronts it. When reminded that that time will more than likely not come during his administration and that consequently he will receive very little recognition for whatever foundation he does manage to lay, he brushes those considerations aside. Instead, he expresses his pleasure with the commitment he has encountered in the attorneys that he is working with in building this structure admitting his impatience, a trait which his wife Jean describes as his greatest fault, with those who, in their quest for personal gratification, ignore the needs of Black people.

In his quest to attract younger, more vocal attorneys from all sections of the country, O.T. articulates an attempt to effect a "translation from rhetoric to action." Younger attorneys are designated as such, not in terms of age, but in terms of their tenure in the NBA. To this end, he has opened the quarterly Executive

Board meeting to all interested members of the NBA and has scheduled the meetings at sites that themselves attract attorneys to the meetings. As a result the Board meetings held to date, in New York and Las Vegas, have attracted record numbers of registrants. The meeting scheduled for the Bahamas, in early May, promises to top the attendance records already set this year. That meeting has a great deal of appeal for Black attorneys, because in addition to the usual business meetings and working seminars, there promises to be some evidence of O.T.'s attempts to establish liaisons with Black attorneys outside the United States. Caribbean attorneys have stated their intention to attend that meeting.

These activities are the means by which O.T. hopes to achieve his long-cherished dream of establishing a viable, activist organization which is appealing to all Black attorneys.

IN RESPONDING to a question about his involvement in the organization once his term in office has ended, O.T. expresses a willingness to assist the new president in whatever way he can and hopes that future administrations will bring to fruition programs which his administration proposed but, because of the lack of time and funds afforded during his single year in office, has been unable to implement. He acknowledges the fact that the future of the NBA is dependent on the strength of the leadership of the group but feels that his obligations to his practice should take precedence over any active leadership role for him in the organization.

The programs mentioned above involve issues that affect primarily the opportunities available to Black attorneys and Black law students. The bar examination is the first one mentioned in conversation with O.T. He feels that Black lawyers have a duty to the profes-

sion and to Black people to see that Blacks who have completed their legal education not be prevented from practicing at the *whim* of the overwhelmingly white American bar. Likewise, he criticizes an attempt in Pennsylvania to limit the number of cases that an attorney can handle. That, he says, is an unnecessary regulation which would tend to deny the attorney not only his unrestricted right to make a living but also his ability to make his own decision as to what he can and cannot do in developing a successful practice. On the subject of Black judges, he feels that the elective process at least has the potential for allowing Black people to elect judges who will be responsive to their interests. One of his most ambitious projects, considering the present financial status of the NBA, would establish a scholarship fund for Black law students.

A life member of the NBA for the last few years, O.T. has recently devoted most of his energies to that organization. In addition, he has served as vice-president of the National Legal Aid and Defenders Association and as a member of the Board of Trustees of the C. H. Mason Theological Seminary of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia. He maintains a close personal relationship with Haywood Burns, first Executive Director of the National Conference of Black Lawyers but does not hold membership in that organization. To him, the purposes of the two organizations, NBA and NCBL, are essentially the same and the two exist in an interrelationship that doesn't involve any competition. He recognizes that the membership of NCBL is mostly composed of young lawyers, in age and experience, and that they tend to be more "activist, outspoken, involved and more concerned in their actions and expressions" than those whom he terms "of my generation and older," but he notes that many of these same young lawyers hold

dual memberships in the NBA and the NCBL.

On the sometimes touchy subject of the relationship between the national Black Law Students Association and the NBA, he acknowledges that there is a "generation gap" but feels that by working together, the leadership in both organizations can establish viable programs which will aid in the development of quality attorneys — through the training of Black law students in areas not treated in law schools and the sensitizing of Black attorneys to new ideas and techniques.

AS FAR AS the traditional Black attorney is concerned, O.T. sees him as a "super-specialist" characterized as handling many varied cases. Despite his own experience in practice, he realizes that most Black lawyers do not "specialize," noting that a speciality can sometimes become routine. Attorneys may be tempted to handle similar cases in a fixed routinized manner making the same arguments or utilizing the same forms from day to day. He is personally trying to restructure his approach to criminal law so as to better utilize his imagination and achieve the best results attainable in any given situation. He visualizes a larger pool of alliances, formal and informal, among Black lawyers and feels that the NBA can serve as the unifying force for Black lawyers to rally around. The complexities of formal organization coupled with the lack of time available for handling his personal affairs dissuades the Black attorney from forming these alliances, but education and informal associations through the NBA could alleviate some of these problems.

The office of President of the NBA is a demanding one and the pressures have not only been felt by O.T., but by his family as well. He and his wife Jean both express concern over the strain of the

year on one another. O.T. displays an enormous amount of pride in his wife, the former Jean Nash, and his son O.T. III, "the apple, pear and any other fruit you want to name" of his eye. This pride is similar to that displayed by his parents when they are observed in the presence O.T. calls Jean his inspiration; he characterizes her as his barometer and maintains the greatest respect for her judgment, especially of his public presentations. He says that one look at her after a speech tells him exactly how he fared. As for Jean Wells herself, she evidences the same strong family tradition that one observes in O.T. — in spite of her incredibly busy schedule she manages to find time to help her brother who is presently starting a business.

Noted throughout the NBA for her beauty, Mrs. Wells even further enhances her attractiveness by her articulate, friendly conversation. She shows no reluctance in speaking out on issues that she feels strongly about. She expresses concern for those obliged to handle the presidency after O.T. and proposes that the organization acquire a full-time director to handle the day-to-day administration of the NBA. She feels that more could be accomplished if the President didn't have to be concerned with the administration, functioning, and structure of the organization, as well as an ongoing legal career.

When asked about the role of the lawyer's wife generally, and NBA wives in particular, Jean articulates a desire for the women's auxiliary of the national group to function as a more supportive arm of the organization that gives rise to its existence. She notes that the auxiliary could, on its own or through its local chapters, raise the money to support an Executive Director or to provide headquarters for the organization from year to year. While her husband has been the President of the NBA, she has served as the President of the New York

Barrister's Wives, and through that affiliation, has learned first-hand just how much can be done in that regard. She proudly discloses that that organization raised \$6000 for scholarships last June and recently assisted in the writing of a proposal that gained \$13 million for a drug program that is a regular project of the Barrister's Wives.

Interest in O.T.'s career has heightened her interest in law and she admits to toying with the notion of a law career herself — maybe, she muses, in less busy times. O.T.'s reaction to that mirrors her own posture — *supportive*. He pledges his support for her in whatever she wants to do. Additionally, he mentions that there are virtually no barriers to women in law now and that judges, juries and opposing counsel, in his opinion, accept female attorneys with none of the hesitation that generally might be expected from such a traditional profession.

Attorney and Mrs. Wells responded somewhat differently to an inquiry about the effect of this year with the NBA on O.T.'s generally recognized sense of humor. He acknowledges a more conscious selectivity in the use of his wit in an effort to avoid the imputation to the organization of remarks which might be misunderstood by those who hear them. Jean, on the other hand, has noticed no such change while she has been around him and really hopes that no such change occurs. She notes that he is at his best with his spontaneity and that she would hate to see that attribute affected by an effort on his part to reflect before responding to every situation which might arise.

O.T. PROFESSES to entertain no political or judicial ambitions, but admits that if opportunities of that nature present themselves that he would at least consider them. His dream is to build a "super Black law firm" able to render service to indigents as well as to clients able to pay,

while at the same time providing experience and fulfillment for Black attorneys.

He confesses to an "old school" aversion to the incorporation of attorneys and law firms, but acknowledges that incorporation could be quite beneficial to the financially denuded lawyer. His objection is to the commercialization of the profession rather than any manifestation of a distrust of the process or any tendency to cling to the *status quo*. Moreover, he criticizes the legal profession for its conservatism and traditionalism, and calls upon the Black attorney to lead the change toward a more modern, responsive profession.

What he envisions does not necessarily entail radical or militant change in the profession, but involves the gearing of the profession to respond to the needs of society. In fact, he sees many of the so-called radical or militant attorneys as merely employing methods and tactics designed to bring the attention of the public to the problems at hand, not as advocating violent overthrow of the system. He recognizes that this may be necessary to shock the conscience or awaken the establishment to the inequities which exist. He sees the violence now being termed revolutionary, as merely piecemeal, and seriously doubts, given the resources of the so-called revolu-

tionary forces, that an all-out armed revolution could be successful. The revolution which now manifests itself in infrequent armed skirmishes is a small part, in fact a rather recent phase, of the revolution which has been in progress for many years in the Black community. Those battles which have traditionally been fought, have been fought in the legal arena. Civil disobedience, the example most often cited as a means of non-violent revolution, has gained its acceptance as a viable means of protest through the efforts of Black attorneys and Black people.

O.T. HOPES THAT Black attorneys become further involved in this revolution employing the skills and techniques acquired in the profession and his knowledge of the legal system to turn the law to the advantage of Blacks. He maintains that the Black attorney, being "better trained in negotiation within the system and with the establishment" is in a unique position to effect changes in all facets of society by utilizing these techniques to respond to the problems of Black people.

* The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Ms. Edith Jackson and the *Black Law Journal* Editors, Maxine Kennedy and Eric Jones in preparing this article. Sincere thanks are also extended to Attorney and Mrs. Wells for their gracious endurance of the many interruptions by the *Journal* staff.