

TRIBUTE AND REMEMBRANCE

OF CHANDLER DAVIDSON

Every once in a while in life, a rare person comes along who inspires you, educates you, and shows you how to be a genuine human being in the world in which we live. Franklin Chandler Davidson, who died April 10, 2021, was one such person and he was one of my dearest friends for over 40 years.

Chandler was born in 1936 on the cattle ranch of his paternal grandparents in west Texas, spending the first five years of his life there surrounded by a loving family and the breathtaking scenery of Trans-Pecos Texas.

Chandler's father served in the Marines during World War II, and after the war obtained a job as a U.S. Border Patrolman, which eventually took his family to Ysleta, Texas, just west of El Paso, where Chandler graduated from high school after having edited the student newspaper. From there, Chandler went to the University of Texas at Austin where, after dropping out and joining the Navy, then working in the oil fields of Louisiana and Texas, he obtained a B.A. degree, majoring in philosophy.

While at UT, Chandler helped found and then led a group of integrationists called Students for Direct Action, which in the winter of 1960 began holding "stand-ins" protesting racial segregation at the movie theaters on the Drag, across from campus. Inspired by the sit-ins that had begun in the Deep South the previous spring, the stand-ins involved whites trying to buy movie tickets for their black friends, and, when refused, going to the end of the line to try again, making the line longer and, it was hoped, discouraging movie patrons from buying tickets. The biracial protests got nationwide attention—including public praise from Eleanor Roosevelt. In the fall of 1961, not long after Chandler had graduated and gone to Poitiers, France, on a Fulbright fellowship, the movie theaters gave in and desegregated. In December 2010 Chandler organized a fifty-year reunion of the beginning of the stand-ins in Austin, attended by over seventy of the original Students for Direct Action, their families, and friends.

Returning to Austin from France in 1962, Chandler was briefly editor of the *Texas Observer*, at the time a weekly liberal news magazine. He then went to Princeton University, where he obtained a Ph.D. in sociology. While at Princeton he was active in a chapter of the national organization, Students for a Democratic Society, and helped organize the first “teach-in” in the nation concerning the Vietnam War.

In 1966, Chandler returned to Texas, where he accepted a job teaching sociology at Rice University—the year Rice first allowed blacks as students. He enjoyed Rice tremendously in his 37 years teaching there, helping found the Sociology Department, receiving a joint appointment to the Political Science Department, becoming the first faculty sponsor of the Black Students Association and, later, at the request of one of his students and later mayor of Houston, Annise Parker, becoming the first faculty sponsor of the gay-lesbian student group. He served as chair of his department for fourteen years, and chaired numerous university committees as well. He won several university-wide teaching prizes, including Rice University’s top academic award, the George R. Brown Award for Excellence in Teaching. His legacy at Rice includes an atmosphere of open-mindedness and diversity. During his years at Rice, Chandler influenced and mentored so many of his students, many of whom stayed in contact with him years after graduation. It is an understatement that he helped shape the lives and successful careers of the students he mentored. He did so much more than that. Upon hearing of Chandler’s death, there was an outpouring from those he mentored noting his kindness and generosity with his time.

Chandler was a fighter for justice and his research focused on race and politics—the subject of various articles and books. His knowledge of election law and voting rights led to his participation as an expert witness testifying on behalf of racial and ethnic minorities in over forty court trials from California to Illinois to Alabama, as well as many in Texas. These included a case challenging the Houston at-large city council election system in the early 1970s which eventually led to the abolition of the system and its replacement by a fairer method of election.

Two cases involved the City of Mobile and Mobile County, Alabama, in 1981. His expert testimony in that case displayed his usual combination of careful research and clear strong testimony explaining the difficulties that

the black community in Mobile faced in electing candidates at-large. The case led to court victories for the black plaintiffs. During the trial, Chandler was asked on cross examination about the election of a black candidate elected at-large in the small fishing/shrimping village of Bayou La Batre (yes, the same village featured in the film *Forrest Gump*). I suppose the aim of the cross examination was to show that black candidates could be elected at-large, and Chandler was certainly prepared to testify that one election of a black man in such a tiny village could hardly be compared to running at-large in the City of Mobile or Mobile County. As Chandler and I were preparing him for cross examination on a Sunday afternoon, we decided to leave our Mobile hotel and drive down to Bayou La Batre. There Chandler interviewed the black candidate who said he had lived in Bayou La Batre his entire life, worked on one of the shrimp boats, that he had no opposition when he ran, and that in the small town, everyone knew everyone.

During Chandler's cross examination, the defense attorney asked if Chandler had been aware that a black candidate had been elected in Bayou La Batre. He said he had. And when the defense attorney then asked Chandler if that proved blacks could be elected at-large, Chandler was ready. He reported the difference in the size of Mobile City and County to that small town and the results of his candidate interview on Bayou La Batre. And to put an exclamation point on his testimony, Chandler finished his answer by saying "One swan doesn't make a summer".

After he said this, the courtroom was in dead silence. No one knew exactly what was wrong, but attorneys were all looking at each other with puzzling looks on their faces. The spectators too seemed uneasy. Two minutes went by in complete silence. Now if you've ever been involved in a trial, you know that two minutes of total silence can seem more like ten minutes (or longer). Finally, Chandler broke the long silence, saying "I believe it's one *swallow* doesn't make a summer." Laughter filled the courtroom. U.S. District Judge Virgil Pittman spoke next, saying to Chandler: "I take it, Doctor, your expertise is not in ornithology". The courtroom erupted in laughter.

That evening, after he had finished testifying, the trial team (which included Jim Blacksher, Larry Menefee, Ed Still, DOJ lawyer Ellen Weber and me, along with expert witnesses J. Morgan Kousser, Peyton McCrary

and Chandler) was having dinner reviewing the events of the day and planning the next day's trial activities. It was at that dinner that I proposed that Chandler be forever known as the Birdman of Bayou La Batre. Chandler was elated with his new nickname, as was I! In recent years, when he took his daily Houston neighborhood walks, he could often be seen wearing a baseball cap proudly bearing the name Bayou La Batre, Alabama, as a fond remembrance of his important role in that case.

Following his Mobile experience, Chandler and I stayed in touch, growing closer and developing a deep friendship. I gave the toast on his and Sharon's wedding day, and later spoke at his 80th birthday party. A fellow Texan, Barbara Bush, once said that the most important yardstick of your success in life is how you treat other people—your family, friends, coworkers, and even total strangers you meet on your life's journey. By that measure, Chandler was the most successful person on earth. He was kind, generous with his time to friends and students, and treated people with respect. I can still see the pride in his eyes discussing his family or when he introduced me to one of his Rice students, always quick to cite some amazing accomplishment they had achieved.

Deeply convinced of the importance of the Voting Rights Act in enabling blacks and Latinos, in particular, to elect their preferred candidates to office, Chandler testified as to the Act's importance before congressional committees on several occasions. When the Voting Rights Act was up for renewal in 2006, he served as one of ten members of the National Commission on the Voting Rights Act under the auspices of the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. The commission held hearings across the nation on the status of minority voting rights and Chandler drafted the Commission's report of its findings. When the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee held hearings on renewal of the Act in Spring 2006, Chandler was the lead witness. His research on the subject of racially discriminatory election systems led to his being cited in seven U.S. Supreme Court decisions.

After retiring from Rice in 2003, he remained active in scholarly research on voting rights, testifying before the U.S. House Rules Committee, the Texas Senate meeting as a whole, and in Federal Court, primarily on matters having to do with minority vote suppression.

In 1986, Chandler married the love of his life Sharon Plummer. Together they began anew their lives' journey. Their nearly 35 years of marriage had one motto: Marriage should be like a duet: when one sings, the other claps. Theirs was a decades-long Love Song, filled with music, love, mutual support, laughter, and road trips. Just a few years ago, Victoria and I drove Chandler and Sharon from Houston to the cattle ranch of his paternal grandparents in west Texas. It was a week long road trip, filled with laughter, music, and Chandler's touching remembrances.

Chandler also had a life-long love affair with chocolate, figs, martinis, margaritas, champagne, whipped cream and, later in life, Mojitos. He insisted that a number of these favorite items be placed in his casket because, as he used to say, you always need these items no matter where you are going!

What also distinguished Chandler was his deep, vibrant distinctive laugh. It was so unique that friends would come up to him at intermissions of plays to report they knew he was in attendance because they heard him laughing. He taught his friends many things, but most of all, to seek a more just and fair society.

Chandler is predeceased by his son, Ian Chandler Davidson, and brother Phillip Kearney Davidson. Besides his loving wife of 34 years, Sharon Plummer, Chandler also leaves: a son, Seth Franklin Davidson, of Los Angeles, CA; daughter-in-law, Yasuko Davidson of Long Beach, CA; grandchildren Cassady Sakura Davidson (Torazo Saito) and their children Ringoro, Kohaku, and Suzunami of Long Beach CA, Hans Hikaru Davidson (Julia) of Vienna, Austria, and Woodrow Shu Davidson of Utsunomiya, Japan. These family members were all beneficiaries of Chandler's positive influence. And how he delighted in reporting with pride the many accomplishments of his sons and grandchildren.

Chandler asked that in lieu of flowers, memorial contributions may be made to the American Civil Liberties Union (UCLA), the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), or the institution of one's choice.

