

Metro Vision

Mark Chinn: Dignity In Law, Balance In Life

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There are lawyers...and then there are lawyers.

In a profession that runs the gamut from corporate attorneys in high profile cases to ambulance chasers running obnoxious television commercials, it takes a different type of lawyer to discuss morality, client comfort, entrepreneurship and commitment to church and family. Certainly such attorneys exist but their voices are increasingly drowned out by the headline-grabbers and the corporate raiders so abundant in modern law. Mark Chinn is one such attorney.

"My mission in life starts with being a good servant of God," Chinn says matter-of-factly in his self-named office building near Highland Village. "Number two in my hierarchy of values is being a good husband to my wife with number three being a nurturing father to my children. Fourth is being a lawyer who pursues excellence for the benefit of his clients. Nowhere in what I just said is an admission that I need to make money to fly around in a Lear jet."

One of the state's leading family/divorce attorneys, Chinn takes a radically different approach to solving what usually are hurtful and damaging problems of the most intimate nature.

"I find it a true calling to find a way to involve my Christian beliefs in the way I counsel my clients," Chinn says, "and I've very interested in bringing moral truths to my family counseling and to the family law context. Now, I don't believe in proselytizing or to try and convert people; but I do believe it is my place to bring right and moral thinking to the actions of our firm in the way we handle our cases and the crises our clients face. We talk a lot here about forgiveness and doing the right thing, no matter what the circumstances." Not always the easiest thing to do, Chinn admits. "But in the long run, it's more constructive for all the parties involved, especially the children."

Chinn, whose family lived in McComb, Mississippi, was born in 1953 in Jackson due to the fact that, at the time, there was no certified OB-GYN in McComb. "My father, Rollin, was the master mechanic at the McComb railroad shop until he was transferred to Chicago with the Illinois Central when I was five." Chinn was subsequently schooled and raised in Flossmoor, Illinois a suburb of Chicago.

"My parents were actually both Northerners," Chinn says. "My father was originally from Iowa and my mother was a Chicago native. Still, I always considered myself a Mississippian," he continues. "There is a real sense of identity living in this state and in the South that is absent in cities such as Chicago. My mother, Ann, thought McComb was the greatest place on the face of the earth, and every summer we would come down on the Panama Limited and spend time with family and friends. We regarded coming back down to Mississippi as a holiday, like going to Disney World!"

When asked about the name Chinn, Mark says his father did research on the name years ago and made some interesting discoveries.

"The name Chinn actually originates from England, where it was something like Chynne, and then was Americanized at some point," he reveals. "But, according to my father's research, we're relatives of George Washington, so, in fact, the name goes back many generations here in America. There was a mayor of Biloxi some years ago named Chinn."

In 1975, Chinn left Illinois to return to Mississippi for good. This time, to Oxford, in order to attend the University of Mississippi Law School.

"You know, every little boy in America wants to grow up and be a policeman or a fireman," Chinn chuckles. "I wanted to be a lawyer! My uncle was a lawyer and a district attorney in Illinois and I had always admired him because he was such a grand gentleman. Also, when I was in junior high, my mother and I always watched the early Seventies TV show 'Petrocelli' about a lawyer who always helped people. I loved the show."

His arrival back in Mississippi was one Chinn says he will never forget.

"I rode the train to Batesville," he says, "and then hitchhiked on a dump truck to the outskirts of Oxford. Coming down from Illinois, I had on boots, blue jeans and a flannel shirt and was pretty dirty after riding on that truck. Well, this was April, and let's just say my appearance didn't bode too well for Oxford, Mississippi!

Nonetheless," Chinn continues, "I walked to the law school, arrived there sopping wet, and interviewed with a wonderful gentleman named William Champion, in charge of Admissions. Twenty years later, he told me that he let me in because he thought that any kid willing to do what I did deserved a shot!" Chinn laughs.

Chinn had left his high school sweetheart ("my only sweetheart," he says) to come to Ole Miss. Her name was Cathy Hawkinson, a Chicago native who was at Iowa State while Chinn was getting his law degree.

"The three years we were apart in college were the worst of my life," Chinn admits. "We were brought up to believe that we didn't have the right to get married, start a home and raise a family until we could support ourselves, so we waited. I regret that now, but it's turned out okay," Chinn grins, noting that he and Cathy have been married some 27 years now and have four daughters: Courtney, Casey, Carley and Conley.

When asked if he finds a certain irony in being a divorce attorney while maintaining such a stable and happy personal family life, Chinn says it's actually an advantage.

"Our job is to counsel, to make people feel cared for and let them know that we feel their pain," Chinn says. "I think my family position does give me insight into areas that my clients may not be able to see themselves."

After graduating from Ole Miss in 1978, Chinn worked first as a counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee for the Mississippi State Senate. "That was a great job for someone like me just coming out of law school," Chinn says. "I got the job after interviewing with Carroll Ingram from Hattiesburg, who was then a state senator and remains, to this day, a close friend and a mentor."

Another well-known influence on Chinn early on in his career was former Lieutenant Governor, Evelyn Gandy. "She and Carroll were close and so I got to know her. She would actually call on me to advise her on certain issues and I would. I well remember walking into her big lieutenant governor's office and she would come around the desk, shake my hand and say, 'How's is my lawyer today?' That made me feel like a million bucks at age 25, let me tell you!" Chinn says.

Chinn went on to work in various other capacities (including stints with the attorney general and with Governor Bill Allain) as well in other private law firms before he went out on his own, opening Mark A. Chinn & Associates on July 1, 1988 in East River Place off of Fortification Street.

"You really haven't lived until you've opened your own business," Chinn notes. "Going out on your own, not knowing where the first piece of business is coming from, whether you'll be bankrupt in a few months. You really learn to walk by faith and realize that nothing in life is guaranteed."

While it was no guarantee, Chinn was fortunate, however, to be able to borrow the use of furniture, secretarial services and office equipment from another attorney with an adjacent office named Jim Lambert. "This really allowed me to get started and save my resources," Chinn reflects, "and within a few months I had enough business to get my own place where I stayed for six or seven years."

It was while located at East River Place that Chinn discovered the real concept of service, comfort and ambiance for his practice from "Perrian's", of all businesses, the old Jackson beauty salon.

"I would go in to visit and was so impressed with the effort they put forth to make the customer feel good and welcome," Chinn says. "Most lawyers set up their offices solely for them and, consequently, they tend to be ultra-conservative and stuffy. I want my clients to feel as if they're walking into a safe haven where they are wonderful sights, sounds and beauty. People should not feel intimidated by their lawyer."

This attention to office ambience has led to media recognition for Chinn's firm as well as work for wife Cathy, who is an interior decorator. "I'm very proud of our office here (the 12,000 square-foot building on Old Canton Road built in July, 1999). Of course," Chinn chuckles, "I was a little upset initially when Cathy wouldn't let me put up my Supreme Court certificate on the wall."

Chinn focused his practice early on to family law for two main reasons: "First, I really enjoyed taking to people about their problems and trying to find solutions to them in order to help," he

says. "Secondly, a consultant from Memphis came in one day years ago, went through my receivables and checking account and said to me, 'Mark, you're a divorce lawyer!' It had never really occurred to me that that was the bulk of my practice.

"This is the work I love doing, that my firm loves doing," Chinn continues. "We leave no stone unturned and no effort is left undone to come up with creative and positive ways—for all parties involved—to resolve differences constructively, fairly, and without a lot of malice. A great deal of our motivation comes from Ecclesiastes, the verse that says, 'Whatever your hands do, do with all of your might.'

"Clients may not stay married and often that's out of my control," Chinn continues. "However, I can help them both develop long-term, constructive plans of action that will hopefully make them better parents and which will leave them friends for the future. Those are always our intentions."

Chinn says he often hears from former clients who have moved forward in life and have done well, with no scars of bitterness thwarting their progress. "That's always very gratifying because, again, that is my goal and the goal of this firm," he says.

Listing his personal heroes as former president and general, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Ole Miss Chancellor Robert Khayat ("a man who accomplishes great things but never at the expense of another"), and Evelyn Gandy, Chinn says now that he has achieved success and contentment in his prolific career, other challenges lie ahead.

"Several years ago, I made the decision to make some adjustments in my life," Chinn explains. "I wanted to focus my attention on church and family and work harder on balance. Balance in life is so important as is the often- underestimated aspect of rest, physical rest, whereby you can slow down and rejuvenate yourself.

Now a young lawyer, one's who just getting cranked up in their career, they really have to give every minute to their profession. But for those like myself, once you reach a certain level of mastery, you have to turn inward toward balance, staying healthy and staying happy. In doing so, imagination and inventiveness can take over and guide you to do great things in your calling."

To accomplish such balance, Chinn says he likes to play golf and work out with weights everyday, but, above all, he treasures the time spent with his family. "There's nothing I like better than spending an entire Saturday watching soccer games whereas fifteen years ago I would have thought I needed to be at the office or socializing at the club or something."

A writer who has penned a book on managing a family law practice to be published this summer, Chinn says in five years he sees himself implementing the new ideas he believes he will develop in that time, creating unheard levels of service in the family law field. "I believe I will be involved much more in management than in day-to-day operations," Chinn muses. "I also have a dream—or fantasy—of having a national talk show like an Oprah or Dr. Phil. . .maybe 'Lawyer Mark'...through which I could relate and relay ideas all the while receiving feedback and opinions. You never know..." Chinn says.

He's been noted as one of America's best lawyers by a myriad of different professional organizations and his firm is consistently ranked as one of the best in family law. Yet Mark Chinn seems to be a man who, while appreciating the accolades, could very well do without them as long as his aforementioned mission statement remained true. Principled while at the same time passionate, Mark Chinn is indeed a rare individual, a rare attorney and a rare citizen of the Metro.