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Kelly and Beth Sessoms

Mark A. Chinn: A Lifetime of Building

By Jennifer Ingram Johnson and Susan Steffey

In the summer of 1978, a young law school graduate stepped off a bus in Hattiesburg carrying little more than a law degree, a willingness to work, and hope for an opportunity. After a series of interviews along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, including one memorable day spent traveling between Biloxi, Gulfport, and Pascagoula in a three-piece suit during a sweltering Mississippi summer, Mark Chinn arrived in Hattiesburg for an interview with then-State Sen. Carroll Ingram regarding a position as counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee.



A Lawyer Who Built More Than a Practice

Mark often humbly describes himself as “just a divorce lawyer in Jackson.” For those of us who know him, though, he is so much more. Susan Steffey of Watkins & Eager has described Mark as follows:

I have worked against and with Mark in litigation since I first

became a member of the Mississippi Bar in 1991. In more recent years, I have served as a mediator in several complex legal matters Mark has handled. I have also served on various committees and in legal organizations with Mark. Without fail, Mark is always prepared, courteous, honest, and level-headed. He exemplifies the qualities one looks for in a member of our Bar. He also goes above and beyond exemplary client representation. He furthers the interests of the Bar. He has been a leader in seeking judicial and legislative reform as it pertains to Mississippi families, women, and children.

As evidenced by Susan’s astute observations of Mark, while he built one of Mississippi’s most respected family law practices, his influence has extended well beyond any courtroom. Over his career he has represented clients through some of life’s most difficult transitions while earning a reputation for exceptional advocacy, professionalism, and compassion.

His professional credentials are exemplary. He is admitted to practice before the United States Supreme Court, the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, and numerous federal courts. He has been recognized repeatedly in *The Best Lawyers in America*, *Mid-South Super Lawyers*, and *Marquis Who’s Who*. He has earned an AV Preeminent rating from Martindale-Hubbell, has been recognized

among Mississippi’s leading attorneys, and was invited to fellowship in the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, one of the profession’s highest distinctions for family law practitioners.

Mark understood early that family law requires something beyond technical legal skill. Clients come to a family lawyer during times of uncertainty, grief, conflict, and transition. Throughout his career, Mark approached those moments with the belief that lawyers are more than advocates; they are counselors entrusted with helping families navigate profoundly personal challenges with dignity and hope.

A Teacher for the Profession

Some lawyers master their craft. Others dedicate themselves to helping fellow lawyers master theirs. Mark chose to do both. Throughout his career he has become one of Mississippi’s most respected legal educators, presenting hundreds of continuing legal education programs throughout Mississippi and across the United States on family law, professionalism, ethics, practice management, technology, marketing, and client service.

His influence expanded even further through his writing. Mark is the author of several books published by the American Bar Association, including *How to Build and Manage a Family Law Practice* and *The Constructive Divorce*. He also contributed to *How to Capture and Keep Clients* and authored numerous articles for legal publications nationwide. Long before conversations about law firm culture, client-centered representation, technology, and value-based practice became common within the profession, Mark was encouraging lawyers to think intentionally about how they served clients and how they built sustainable practices.

One of the opportunities he remembers most fondly was teaching Law Practice Management at Mississippi College School of Law. Rather than focusing solely on office mechanics, Mark designed the course around a broader vision of professional life. Students learned practical matters such as leasing office space, purchasing equipment, and managing a practice, but they also developed mission statements, articulated personal values, and established long-term

That interview changed the course of his life. That evening, from a hotel room in Hattiesburg, Mark called his wife, Cathy, with the news that he had been offered the job. The position paid \$1,000 a month, which was excellent compensation for a young lawyer at the time, and, more importantly, it provided an entry point into public service and the Mississippi legal community that would shape the next five decades of his professional life.

During Mark’s first legislative session, under the leadership of Sen. Ingram who served as Chair, the Judiciary Committee passed 21 pieces of legislation, including significant open records, open meetings, and ethics legislation. The experience also brought him into close contact with Lt. Gov. Evelyn Gandy, one of the most influential public servants in Mississippi history.

Over his career, Mark has become one of Mississippi’s premier family law attorneys and professional leaders. The young lawyer who arrived in Mississippi seeking a job found something much more enduring: a professional home, a community of mentors, and a calling that would ultimately make him one of the most respected lawyers, educators, authors, and innovators in the state’s history.

Through his leadership, writing, and unwavering commitment to professionalism, his influence has reached far beyond the thousands of clients he has represented.

goals for both their careers and their lives. His message was simple but enduring: successful lawyers build successful lives first.

Leadership That Left Institutions Stronger

Mark's commitment to service has always extended beyond his own practice. As Chair of The Mississippi Bar's Solo and Small Firm Section, he became a passionate advocate for the thousands of lawyers practicing outside large firms. At a time when solo practitioners often felt overlooked, Mark worked tirelessly to ensure their voices were heard and their contributions recognized. Under his leadership, the Section dedicated an entire issue of *The Mississippi Lawyer* to solo and small-firm practice and helped elevate the importance of lawyers serving communities across Mississippi. This work earned him the Award of Merit in 1996.

His leadership continued as President of the Hinds County Bar Association. During his presidency, Mark established the Hinds County Bar Professionalism Award, a recognition that continues to honor exemplary lawyers today. He expanded educational opportunities by introducing affordable lunchtime CLE programs, strengthened communication through an informative association newsletter, and encouraged lawyers to view professionalism not as an abstract ideal but as a daily responsibility.

His leadership was also inclusive. As chair of the Hinds County Bar's nominating committee, he helped ensure the election of the association's first Black president by encouraging the nomination of outstanding, highly qualified candidates who reflected the diversity and excellence of the profession.

Mark also chaired The Mississippi Bar Family Law Section, strengthening educational programming through newsletters, annual "Hot Tips" seminars, and timely updates on significant appellate decisions affecting practitioners across the state.

His commitment to legal education extended to the University of Mississippi School of Law, where, as Chair of the Lamar Society, he led a statewide effort that dramatically increased membership and scholarship support for future generations of law students.

Shaping the Future of Family Law

Even after more than forty years in practice, Mark continues serving to improve the legal profession and better serve Mississippi families. In 2020, as Mississippi Bar President, Jennifer Ingram Johnson asked Mark to chair an ad hoc Mississippi Bar committee charged with studying wheth-

er Collaborative Law should be formally adopted in Mississippi. He readily agreed and got to work straight away.

The committee brought together lawyers and judges representing diverse practice areas, judicial philosophies, and perspectives to examine the process carefully. Under Mark's leadership, the committee approached its work thoughtfully, efficiently, and collaboratively. Following extensive study, the members concluded that Collaborative Law offered Mississippi families an important additional option for resolving disputes outside the traditional adversarial process.

Mark presented the committee's recommendation to The Mississippi Bar Board of Commissioners, requesting authorization to petition the Mississippi Supreme Court for adoption of Mississippi Collaborative Law Rules. The recommendation received unanimous approval, and the Petition was subsequently filed with the Mississippi Supreme Court. The Supreme Court granted the Petition and adopted the rules in 2024, establishing a new dispute-resolution process for Mississippi families and lawyers.

Service Beyond the Courtroom

Mark's belief in service goes beyond the legal profession. For six years he served as President of the Jackson Urban League, embracing its enduring philosophy: "Not Alms, but Opportunity." Under his leadership, the organization focused on providing people with the tools to achieve economic independence and lasting success.

His civic leadership also included service with Leadership Jackson, the United Way, the Arts Alliance of Jackson, and numerous community organizations. Among his favorite memories is chairing Jackson's Jubilee JAM festival, where he introduced the International Village celebrating Mississippi's many cultures and wel-

comed the Olympic Torch during the Atlanta Olympic year. It reflected Mark's unending desire to bring people together around shared purpose and shared community.

Outside the office, Mark's interests have been as varied as his career. He has earned a black belt in karate, obtained his pilot's license, played competitive rugby, written short stories, sung in a men's quartet and church choir, and pursued a lifelong love of learning. Those pursuits reveal the same curiosity, discipline, and enthusiasm that have defined his professional life.

A Legacy That Continues

Spend time with Mark today, and he is far more likely to talk about his family than his résumé. He speaks with unmistakable pride about Cathy, his wife and partner in life for nearly fifty years, their four daughters, and their grandchildren. Mark describes them as the greatest blessings of his life.

For Mark, professional excellence is simply one expression of a life rooted in faith, family, service, generosity, and gratitude. Looking back, it is remarkable to consider what began with a young lawyer stepping off a bus in Hattiesburg in 1978 looking for an opportunity. From there he built a distinguished law practice, helped build better lawyers, helped build stronger professional organizations, helped build new pathways for resolving family conflict, and most importantly, he helped build a profession that is more thoughtful, more compassionate, and more committed to serving others because of his influence.

The Mississippi Bar's Lifetime Achievement Award honors careers that leave a lasting imprint on the profession and the administration of justice. Mark A. Chinn's career has done exactly that.

Congratulations to Mark for this well-deserved honor!



Mark Chinn and his family at the Bar's July 9 Annual Business Session, where he was presented with the Lifetime Achievement Award.

Bar Convention 2026

Biloxi, Mississippi

Annual Business Session



Incoming Bar President
A. Kelly Sessoms III (left)
Outgoing Bar President
J. Rhea Tannehill, Jr. (right)



Bar Past Presidents at Annual Business Session

Bar Convention 2026

Biloxi, Mississippi

Award Winners 2026

Lifetime Achievement Award 2026

Mark A. Chinn



Judicial Excellence Award 2026

Judge Dal Williamson



Distinguished Service Award 2026

John T. Rouse



50-Year Anniversaries



50-Year Anniversary Members present to be recognized at the Annual Business Session were (back row) Thomas L. Sweat, Jr., Anselm J. Dees, Jr., Robert R. Bailess, Charles W. Wright, Jr., Jay Gore III, Edward J. Currie, Jr., Robert H. Pedersen, Ben J. Piazza, Jr., Robert M. Arentson, Jr., Wayne E. Ferrell, Jr., Floyd G. Hewitt, Jr. Front row, T. Harris Collier III, Karl R. Steinberger, Frank G. Power, Jamie G. Houston III, T. Larry Wilson, Richard C. Roberts III, Robert A. Biggs III, Lester J. Meng III, John H. McWilliams, George E. Estes III.