

## **AMERICAN COLLEGE OF CONSUMER FINANCIAL SERVICES LAWYERS**

Senator William Proxmire Lifetime Achievement Award

Presented on March 30, 2019 to

**Robert A. Cook**

The American College of Consumer Financial Services Lawyers is pleased to present its William Proxmire Lifetime Achievement Award for 2019 to Robert A. Cook.

### **The Early Years**

Robert was born in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1951 and raised in an era when people thought hiding under your school desk was an effective defense to a nuclear attack. Robert fled Arkansas for college. After five years at two different colleges, Robert graduated from Washington and Lee University in Virginia in 1975. His first career was in journalism, and he eventually met his future wife when they were both working at The Roanoke Times in Roanoke, Virginia.

The paper had a strict nepotism rule, so when Robert and Teresa decided to get married, at least one of them had to quit the paper. This anachronistic policy led Robert to apply to law school. After Robert's application was accepted by Georgetown University Law Center, he and Teresa continued to work at the newspaper until the last minute in order to save for law school. They married in Teresa's hometown of Hershey, Pennsylvania the Saturday before Robert started law school on Monday. Their first son, Michael, was born two days before Robert graduated in 1981. Teresa is still waiting for her honeymoon.

### **Career in Law**

Robert's journey from law school to the Lifetime Achievement Award was marked with several mileposts. He began his legal career with the Baltimore firm of Semmes, Bowen & Semmes, joining its Banking Department, which included a then-young partner, Tom Hudson. Robert and Tom worked closely together at Semmes, and when New York-based Willkie Farr & Gallagher came looking for consumer credit lawyers to join its D.C.-based Banking Department, the two of them took the plunge.

Willkie was mostly a finance practice, and when the stock market took a big drop in 1989, only three of the 17 associates in the class eligible for partnership were promoted. Robert wasn't among them, so he and Tom considered their options, and moved the practice to Baltimore and D.C. offices of Venable, Baetjer & Howard in 1989.

In 1997, Robert and seven other Venable lawyers, with Venable's blessing, formed Hudson Cook, adding two other non-Venable lawyers to round out the 10 founding partners of the new firm. I'll note that at least two spouses in this room mortgaged their homes for the firm's initial working capital loan. Robert is now Partner Emeritus of the firm, having retired at the end of 2018. His practice included assisting national and state banks, savings associations, credit unions, mortgage bankers and other licensed lenders in the development and maintenance of nationwide consumer finance programs; conducting due diligence on consumer finance portfolios for Wall Street firms; and advising FinTech startups. Late in his career he also worked with the emerging merchant cash advance and small business loan industry. He has been ranked by Chambers and is listed as a Best Lawyer.

During his 37-year career, Robert was actively involved in several state and national associations. Like many in this room, at the start, he paid his dues at the state level. He was a member of the Section Council, Business Law Section of the Maryland State Bar Association; Chairman, Subcommittee on

Consumer Credit, Business Law Section of the MSBA; and Chaired the MSBA Subcommittee of Financial Institution Regulation.

At the national level, he chaired the Consumer Credit Committee of the Federal Reserve Board Consumer Advisory Council, and chaired (disguised as "Captain Z") the Subcommittee on Truth in Lending of the ABA Business Law Section Consumer Financial Services Committee. As a very young lawyer, Robert was among those who revived the ABA CFSC Young Lawyer's Committee. Barry Abbot was asked to be a mentor to the YLC, and a small group of lawyers (including several in attendance this evening) gathered with Barry and Robert at the offices of Semmes, Bowen & Semmes during an ABA meeting in Baltimore to re-form the Committee. A Federal Reserve Board attorney, Adrienne Hurt, was the inaugural speaker.

Robert was a founding fellow and former President of the American College of Consumer Financial Services Lawyers (having also served as Vice President and Treasurer). Robert's first duty as an officer of the American College was to restore its lapsed tax-exempt status. We thank Robert for his extraordinary efforts on behalf of the College.

### **Robert as an Author and Lecturer**

Robert's professional writing and speaking credits are too numerous to mention, so, with the exception of his editorship of the revision to Ralph Rohner's and Fred Miller's seminal tome - the ABA Business Law Section's Truth in Lending book - we won't mention them, but the breadth and depth of his scholarship would do credit to just about anyone here.

### **Robert's Firm Leadership**

When Hudson Cook was founded, neither Robert nor Tom had experience at managing anything larger than a practice group. They had the good fortune of having, as one of the firm's founding partners, a fellow named Dan Tracy, who had been the managing partner of a medium-sized Maryland firm before moving to Venable and then to Hudson Cook.

Robert became the firm's Managing Partner, while Dan was its Administrative Partner. Tom, wanting no part of running the firm other than the marketing effort, became the firm's Chair, a purely honorary position.

Robert and Dan, and after Dan's retirement, Robert and Tim Meredith, ran the place. In doing so, Robert did a superb job of learning the financial side of the legal business, becoming the firm's ad hoc CEO/COO. He had always been a tech whiz, and added to his duties by becoming, in effect, the firm's CIO. Much of the firm's success can be traced directly to Robert.

### **On a Personal Note**

In addition to Michael, Robert and Teresa were blessed with two other sons, and now have two wonderful daughters-in-law and a granddaughter. Michael, a technical writer, his wife Angy, a professor of neuroscience, and their daughter Hazel live an hour away in Frederick, Maryland. Robert and Teresa's youngest son, Peter, a bar manager, and his wife Rachel, a claims specialist for the Social Security Administration, live in Baltimore. Their middle son, Thomas, who lives in Austin, Texas, continues to pursue a career in the visual arts. Thomas' stunning paintings grace Robert's office and home.

Robert's hobbies are gardening and running. He grew up next to his grandfather, on land that had once been an active dairy farm. His father and grandfather maintained a large vegetable garden, and Robert

has tried to have a garden wherever he has lived. Now, Robert has become somewhat of a semi-pro. In 2014 as he contemplated retirement, Robert completed the coursework required to become a University of Maryland Extension Master Gardener.

As a Master Gardener, Robert works with community gardens in inner-city Baltimore. He has also expanded his own backyard garden, in 2017 harvesting more than a half-ton of produce. This year, the Maryland Horticulture Society Home and Garden Tour will include his extensive vegetable garden and native plant rain garden.

As a runner, Robert participates with the largest running group in Baltimore, and leads its Friday morning hill workouts. Robert, believing that all things (other than gardening) should be done in moderation, does not run marathons, but still competes in half-marathons and shorter races, regularly placing in – and occasionally winning – his age group. Robert also regularly organized fellow runners among the Consumer Financial Services Committee for morning jaunts during ABA meetings. He claims that these morning runs are the only thing he will really miss in retirement.

### **The REAL Robert**

Enough History. Courtesy of Hudson Cook partner Aline Ryan, who was in the same Semmes, Bowen & Semmes entering associate class with Robert, here are some Robert fun facts:

- Robert once had hair. And rumor has it a very long pony tail when in college.
- Robert was always the first to arrive at work (i.e., no later than 7:00 a.m., often earlier), and generally leaving around 6:00 p.m., if a normal work day.
- Robert was provided a word-processing machine a decade before attorneys were required to use PCs. Robert then word-processed all of his documents, accelerating his document delivery time, impressing partners and clients alike.
- Robert hates to drive in areas outside Baltimore and will con whomever is traveling with him to be the chauffeur.
- Robert was so worried that his Saturn sedan would be stolen, even when parked next to a Porsche, that he always placed a “CLUB” on the steering wheel.
- Robert is an excellent figure skater (not a regular ol’ ice skater, but figure skater).
- Robert loves foie gras with a good glass of sauterne, and a glass of port after dinner. This is an indirect way of saying Robert, a good ol’ boy from Arkansas, loves fancy food the name of which he cannot pronounce and good wine, not necessarily in that order.
- Robert once had a fearsome temper, but if he lost his temper, he always apologized. That temper disappeared proportionally based on the time left to his retirement.
- Robert has always been and continues to be one of the most generous people one may have the good fortune to meet and know.
- Robert’s first love was not Hudson Cook, the law, computers, running, HouseLaw, or gardening; it was and is his wife, Teresa Cook, his three sons and now his beautiful granddaughter.