

Moving tributes paid to Judge Griffin Bell at his memorial service beautifully captured the scope of his service from presidents to common folks. I was present, representing the millions of unknown people that his past efforts have benefited and will continue to benefit for generations to come.

As was noted in the service, Judge Bell was influenced early on in his life by family members in realizing how important a role the law plays in our society, in the every day lives of people. Dr. Sapp in his eulogy said that Judge Bell, "saw the law as a tool for resolving human conflict, not increasing it". It is an extremely meaningful quote. Little known among the lasting achievements of Judge Bell's life is his creating the Neighborhood Justice Center pilot project for the nation during his first six months as attorney general. While attempting and succeeding at restoring the credibility of the U.S. Department of Justice post Watergate, he concurrently took the time to do something about improving our system of justice at the local level.

I have attached for your information the letter to the editor of the Fulton County Daily Report sent by Mr. Shinji Morokuma, Executive Director of the Georgia Supreme Court's Office of Dispute Resolution, detailing the impact on Georgia that Judge Bell's pioneering project has had. Over the past 30 years, what is not noted often is that what Judge Bell began in Atlanta, Georgia; Kansas City, Missouri; and Los Angeles, California has been replicated in countless community and court-related programs throughout our nation. That initial small experiment in the use of alternatives to litigation, primarily mediation, has led to a significant paradigm shift in the way law is practiced in our country. The late Warren Berger, Chief Justice of the United States, said in a speech to lawyers in 1984 that "...We must be healers of conflict..." Today, the fastest growing and second largest section of the American Bar Association is the Section of Dispute Resolution. This section, created in 1994 as result of the enormous work being done in the alternative dispute resolution arena, is dedicated to enhancing the use of alternatives to litigation. This fact underscores the national impact Judge Bell's bold and creative experiment, begun back in 1977, has had on court systems, litigants, lawyers, taxpayers, and the general public.

I have made an effort to tell part of Griffin Bell's story so that so many can know of yet another of Judge Bell's incredible, lasting contributions to our country.

Thank you,

Edith B. Primm, Esq.  
Executive Director  
Justice Center of Atlanta, Inc.

Obituaries upon the death of Griffin B. Bell have detailed his numerous professional accomplishments as U.S. attorney general, U.S. appellate court judge, and partner at King & Spalding. What has not been noted in the obituaries and what you may not know is that alternative dispute resolution in Georgia likely owes its very existence to the groundwork laid by Judge Bell in the mid-1970s.

After Judge Bell was appointed attorney general by President Jimmy Carter in 1977, one of his first official acts was to launch a national experiment to test the viability of mediation and arbitration processes in resolving minor disputes. Judge Bell's experiment established three "Neighborhood Justice Centers" - in Kansas City, Los Angeles, and Atlanta - that would serve as sites for the Justice Department's pilot project on dispute resolution. The pilot was based on the concepts of Harvard Law Professor Frank Sander, who believed that neighborhood justice centers could provide people with faster, fairer and less expensive resolutions of their disputes than the courts offered. Another important goal of Judge Bell's project was to help relieve overcrowding in the court system.

Each of Judge Bell's three neighborhood justice centers organized themselves differently. The Kansas City center was run by the city, and the Los Angeles center became a bar association function. The Atlanta center chose to become a private, non-profit organization, and it expanded its mission beyond neighborhood disputes by its offering mediation and arbitration services to local courts. The Atlanta center's pioneering success in resolving court cases inspired the Georgia Supreme Court and the State Bar of Georgia to create the Commission on Dispute Resolution and the court-connected ADR system in 1992. Judge Bell's experiment also helped spur the growth of hundreds of neighborhood justice centers and other community dispute resolution centers nationwide.

Today, of the three pilot centers Judge Bell established, only the Atlanta center remains, in the form of the Justice Center of Atlanta, which has earned a national and international reputation for dispute resolution services and training. As the Justice Center's reputation has grown, so has our court-connected ADR system, and together they have encouraged the adoption of ADR processes in the public and private sectors in Georgia. Commission Member Edie Primm, executive director of the Justice Center and a senior staff member at the Center since 1979, told me recently that,

“We in the Georgia dispute resolution community literally owe Griffin Bell our professional lives in no small way.”

It is worth pondering if our court-connected ADR system would exist in its vital form today had Judge Bell not selected Atlanta as one of his pilot sites for his visionary experiment and planted the seeds of dispute resolution without litigation in Georgia.

Griffin Bell’s memorial service will be held 11 a.m. Friday, January 9, at Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church, 2715 Peachtree Road, N.E., Atlanta. I urge all members of the ADR community to show their appreciation and respect for Judge Bell’s work by attending the service and thanking his family.

Shinji Morokuma, Director  
Georgia Office of Dispute Resolution