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FAX # (334) 863-6062 TOTAL NO. OF PAGES 4

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RE: \_\_\_\_\_

URGENT       FOR REVIEW       PLEASE REPLY

NOTES/COMMENTS: \_\_\_\_\_

More than twenty years ago in the late 1970s, I had the opportunity to meet a most remarkable man--the affable and unflappable Wilkie Clark of Randolph County. At the time I was wearing two hats, serving as state field director of the Alabama Democratic Conference and state secretary of the NAACP State Conference.

Although I can't recall the first time that I met Wilkie Clark, I'm sure it was at a meeting of the Democratic Conference or the NAACP. From the outset I was impressed by Wilkie Clark. I liked his manner of speech, his animated style, and his expressive face. When he talked to you, he often got real close, as if he planned to whisper some secret or share some great confidence with you.

The great confidences that he often shared during these close encounters usually involved some graphic account of how "low-down" some white people were, especially those who sought to thwart black folks' progress. It was always a special treat to be in Wilkie Clark's company, because he was a masterful linguist when it came to using black speech and robust profanity to indict white folks for their many racist misdeeds and injustices.

One night, in the 1980s, at an NAACP State Convention in Huntsville, Wilkie Clark and I stayed up almost all night, expounding and recapitulating on what it's like being a black man in America. For the most part, I was the great listener and learner; Mr. Clark was the great talker and teacher. He was in rare form that evening. After a few drinks, he became an east Alabama griot, sharing with me the rich and troublesome history of his struggle to be a strong, stand-up black man in Randolph County. His liquor was talking good. It told old truths, boldly, about one man's courage and determination to be a giant and not a gnat, in his community. I learned so much from Mr. Clark that night. And I gained so much respect for him as well. The evening went so well and so long until we ended up at a Waffle House, where we continued our dialogue, almost till dawn. He was in his element. And I was in hog heaven. Mr. Clark was

Wilkie Clark  
Page 2

chain-smoking and sweating and drinking coffee, non-stop. As he spoke of his life, his family, and the burdens he has had to bear, his expressive face would sometimes go from a broad smile to a deep-dimpled scowl. Indeed, he let me know that at this point in his life, he ain't "taking no shit from anyone." From the tone of his conversation, I was totally convinced that Wilkie Clark was a man on a mission.

What I particularly liked about Wilkie Clark was his commitment to justice. From his conversation it didn't take me long to learn that he admired black men who had the guts to stand up to white men, and to fight for justice and equality. Therefore, that explains why he was so fond of my boss, Joe Reed, the chairman of the Alabama Democratic Conference. On one occasion Wilkie Clark told me: "Jerome, I just love Joe Reed, because these white folks are as scared of him as a rattlesnake."

On another occasion he was proud of me, too, when ADC sued the Randolph County Commission, the Randolph County School Board, and the city of Roanoke, challenging their at-large election systems in the mid-1980s. I took the initiative to draw the redistricting plan for the Commission, that created a majority black commission district for the first time.

Alas, on the night that I and my ADC office assistant, Darryl Sinkfield, traveled to Randolph County to present our proposed redistricting plan to the Commission, Wilkie Clark met us outside the county courthouse in Wedowee. He was beaming with pride. His body language and his words communicated excitement for what we were about to accomplish. He told me: "Jerome, ADC's got these white folks scared to death. And don't you lighten up on them when you go in there." I didn't.

The meeting room was packed with whites and blacks. Periodically, during my presentation, I would look in Wilkie Clark's direction. His face was aglow, as if to say, "now is my time to get justice after all these years."

Wilkie Clark  
Page 3

We had a successful evening. The Randolph County Commission agreed later to adopt our proposed plan, with some modifications. In 1988, Rev. Lathonia Wright became the first black to be elected to the Randolph County Commission. However, perhaps the best outcome of all was to see Wilkie Clark's daughter, Clarlotte Clark-Frieson, succeed in becoming the first black elected to the Randolph County Board of Education, as a result of the ~~restricting~~ lawsuit, coupled with the pioneering courage and adacity of her dad for so many years. As William Shakespeare might say about all this: "All's Well That Ends Well."