

## **SUGGESTED CHAPTER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

*Crusader for Justice: Federal Judge Damon J. Keith*

Compiled, written, and edited by Peter J. Hammer and Trevor W. Coleman

Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014

### **Chapter 1: “Humble Roots-The Lawyer and the Janitor,” p. 3-9**

1. What life experiences have you had that you feel helped shape your personality?
2. What do you think the phrase “Equal Justice Under law” means today? Give three examples of how our society meets this motto and three examples of how it has fallen short.
3. What experiences did your parents have that you feel helped shape your life?

### **Chapter 2: “The Early Education of Damon J. Keith,” p. 11-15**

1. What does the phrase “message of limited opportunities” mean? What “limits” do you face in your “opportunities”? ( p. 12)
2. Do you agree with the phrase “Life turns on the smallest things”? What examples can you provide that support and/or that oppose this view?

### **Chapter 3: “College Life-West Virginia State College,” p. 17-22**

1. How might Damon have felt as he left Detroit for the first time, traveling by train from the Michigan Depot to Charleston, West Virginia?
  2. How might your preparing to leave home for college differ from the experiences Damon faced?
  3. How did Damon react to his experience in Cincinnati?
  4. How might you react to the fraternity pledge experience that Damon had?
- Today, Judge Keith can still recite two poems he memorized as an Alpha Phi Alpha pledge at West Virginia State College. Do you have any favorite poems? Have you memorized any?

### **Chapter 4: “The Finest Man I’ve Ever Met,” p. 23-26**

1. How did saying “Farewell” differ from saying “Hello”?
2. What were Damon’s feelings as a result of the two “farewells” which he faced in 1943?

### **Chapter 5: “1943-War in the Streets/War Overseas,” p 27-33**

1. How did the 1943 riot affect Damon?
2. How might you feel as you left your city as a young adult, as Damon did in 1944?

### **Chapter 6: “Howard University School of Law-The West Point of Civil Rights,” p. 35-40**

1. Damon’s friend Tommie Newsome suggested that Damon consider applying for law school. How have suggestions from friends affected your life?
2. How did the message of Howard University Law School , “Use the law as a means of social change” impact Damon’s future? (p. 39)
3. Damon felt he had a debt to Charles Hamilton Houston that he could never repay. Do you recall? How have you dealt with similar debts in your life?

**Chapter 7: “Learning the Bar,” p. 41-46**

1. What problem did Damon’s mother Annie face in trying to purchase a new home? How was the problem solved? How do you feel about the problem and its solution?
2. Damon had to respond to adversity when he learned he did not pass the bar exam on his first attempt. How do you think you would react in a similar situation?
3. What reaction might you have if the first two jobs you got after getting your law degree were similar to Damon’s experience?
4. Why did both white and black clients prefer to not hire a black attorney? How do you think this attitude is different today, if it is. (p. 44-45)
5. How was Damon able to obtain his first case? How did this case later affect his view of justice at that time? (p. 45-46)

**Chapter 8: “Rachel,” p. 47-53**

1. A friend arranged for Damon to meet Rachel, his future wife. What factors helped them establish a successful marriage? How might shared values and attitudes contribute to a successful marriage?
2. How might expectations, such as Damon had about the Virginia farm, be changed by reality? Describe any similar experience you might have had in your life.

**Chapter 9: “Taking A Chance-Life as a Young Lawyer”, p. 55-58**

1. How did the challenges of Damon’s Howard University professors (“Change the world! Break down the wall!. Halt the injustices.!”) influence his career decisions? (p. 55)
2. How did the advice from Fred Tharps change Damon’s life? (p. 56-57)

**Chapter 10: “A Room on the Second Floor-Rebuilding Detroit’s NAACP,” p. 59-65**

1. How did a visit to the Detroit NAACP office on Vernor Highway change Damon’s life? How might your life be impacted by seeking out new experiences and opportunities?
2. What influence, if any, did the 1948 Supreme Court decision in *Shelley v. Kramer* and its companion case *McGhee v. Sipes* have on housing patterns in Detroit?
3. What lesson might you learn about building an organization from the experience Art Johnson and Damon Keith had at the Detroit Chapter of the NAACP? ( p. 61)
4. Why was Detroit’s first Freedom Fund Dinner successful? (p. 62-63)

**Chapter 11: “Out On Your Own-Damon Keith became His Own Start-Up,” p. 67-75**

1. Why was Damon called a “Rainmaker”? Why do you think he was so successful in this role? (P. 68)
2. What obstacles did Damon face in his first case at his own law firm? Why do you think he won the case? (p. 69)
3. Why did Damon’s statement before Judge Ricca in 1958 become a concern several years later? Do you think Damon responded appropriately before Judge Ricca? What might you have done in this situation? (p. 73-75)

**Chapter 12: “A Leader emerges-From Jack Kennedy to Willie Horton,” p. 77-83**

1. Why might Damon have felt intimidated in first meeting Senator Kennedy? How did he rise to the situation? Can you think of any similar situation you have had to face? How did you respond? (p. 78)

2. Damon Keith became the legal guardian of 16 year old Willie Horton. What impact do you think this relationship had on Willie? On Damon? On Rachel? (p. 80-82)

**Chapter 13: "Detroit, 1967-The Fire This Time," p. 85-95**

1. On July 23, 1967, Damon and Rachel were packing suitcases for a trip to Hawaii. However, an event in Detroit caused a change in their plans. How did the Keiths react in their situation? Have you ever had plans similarly altered by outside events? If so, how what was your reaction?
2. During the mid to late 1960s, what factors contributed to the civil unrest in Detroit and other urban areas across the nation? How have these issues been addressed over the past half century?
3. Calling for federal troops was one of the most challenging decisions made in Detroit that July. Why was the decision made and how did Damon feel? Compare this account with other narratives of the Detroit riot of 1967. What similarities and differences do you notice? Can you explain why the accounts differ?
4. How did Damon respond to the statement of a businessman at the first meeting of New Detroit? What was the result of this discussion? What impact do you think this had on Detroit's future?

**Chapter 14, "Approaching the Bench-The Long and Winding Politics of Becoming a Judge," p. 97-110**

1. What lessons did Keith learn from John Swainson in the early 1960s? How was this lesson repaid in the late 1970s? What life lesson might another person learn from Keith's actions?
2. How might Otis Smith have benefited from Keith's campaign strategy? Why do you think some recent political campaigns have been successful while others fail? What examples can you offer?
3. What were the issues facing U.S. Senator Philip Hart as he considered the appointment of a federal judge to replace Judge Wade McCree? How did the Voelker letter impact the decision? What factors do you think helped Senator Hart make his decision?

**Chapter 15: "Into the Maelstrom: Busing in Pontiac," p. 111-120**

1. In the fifty years since Judge Keith was given a painting by his law partners, what changes in society might have affected the meaning of the painting? What issues might not have changed?
2. In the *Davis v. School District of Pontiac* decision, why was Judge Keith able to avoid following the *Deal v. Cincinnati* decision of the United States Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals?
3. What public reactions developed after Judge Keith's decision was upheld by the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals?

**Chapter 16: "Housing in Hamtramck and Discrimination at Detroit Edison," p.121-136**

1. Based on the discussion of *Davis v. School District of City of Pontiac* (1970) and *Stamps v. Detroit Edison* (1975), what do you consider the proper role for personal life experiences in making judicial decisions?
2. What similarities and what differences do you observe in *Davis v. School District of City of Pontiac* (1970) and *Stamps v. Detroit Edison* (1975)

**Chapter 17: "Taking on the Nixon White House: The Keith Case," p. 137-146**

1. What emotions might you feel if you were Judge Keith waking up on the morning of June 19, 1972?

2. What do you think Judge Keith might have ruled today, in light of terrorism issues, if faced with issues he faced in the 1971 wiretapping case.
3. What changes do you think have taken place in the “Imperial Presidency” since the early 1970s? How has this evolution in the Presidency affected our national political system today?

**Chapter 18: “Affirmation Action:- In the Detroit Police Department,” p. 14-158**

1. How did Judge Keith’s memory of the 1943 Detroit riot affect his decision in the *Baker v. City of Detroit* 1975 ruling?
2. Discuss the factors upon which Judge Keith based his ruling in this complicated case.

**Chapter 19: “Tell Him Thurgood’s on the Line,” p. 159-168**

1. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter provided a life-changing opportunity to Judge Keith. Why did he consider remaining on the Eastern District bench in Detroit? What do you think caused him to accept the new appointment?
2. As his three daughters moved towards adulthood, Damon and Rachel Keith had to deal with their unique circumstances along with facing the normal challenges of parenting. How did they do this?
3. How did Judge Keith feel that the role and atmosphere of the Sixth Circuit had changed during his service there?

**Chapter 20: “Here, Boy, Park This Car,” p. 169-180**

1. Have you ever witnessed blatant racism, as described by Judge Keith in the restaurant hotel? If you did, what was your reaction?
2. How was Judge Keith able to use the ‘park the car’ experience to illustrate the need for racial justice?
3. Judge Keith continues to stand strongly for principles of racial justice. In the 1970s, addressing the issue of “reverse racial discrimination” in a Memphis case, he favored continuation of a plan combating discrimination against blacks. He maintained this view in a 2012 Cleveland case. How would you respond to his views?

**Chapter 21: Strange Bedfellows: Damon Keith and Clarence Thomas,” p. 181-197**

1. Do you have friendships similar to that between Judge Keith and Justice Thomas? How can such relationships develop? Why might there be value for both men in their friendship?
2. What lesson might be learned from Judge Keith’s attitude in working with Justice Thomas in the GM issue before the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)?
3. How might you react if an invitation extended to you was withdrawn, as the National Bar Association (NBA) Executive Committee did to Justice Thomas in 1998?
4. Why was Judge Keith determined to support Justice Thomas? How successful was he? What ‘life lessons’ might be learned from Judge Keith’s reaction?

**Chapter 22: “Swimming Upstream: Ideological and Political Shifts in the Court,” p. 199-206**

1. Judge Keith felt that Justice Thurgood Marshall had had a major influence on his life. Who would you identify as strongly impacting your life? Why?

2. As the federal courts moved towards more conservative decisions, Judge Keith began to feel like Sisyphus. Have you faced similar situations? How did you respond?
3. Do you believe Judge Keith was correct in his view that the use of “en banc” by the Sixth Circuit was politically-motivated? Why or why not?

**Chapter 23:** “Democracies die behind closed doors,” p. 207-219

1. How would you define “hero”? Who do you think is a ‘hero’ today? Do you agree with Bob Herbert, a New York Times columnist? Why or why not?
2. How would you compare the Creepy Directive with the core democratic values of the United States?

**Chapter 24:** “The Keith Law Clerk Family,” p.221-230

1. Why do you think Judge Keith was able to attract so many highly qualified clerks?
2. Select one of Judge Keith’s favorite “adages” listed on p. 226. Explain why you think the phrase has value in your life.

**Chapter 25:** “Friends along the way-From Rosa to Russia,” p.231-245

1. Why do you think Rosa Parks and Damon Keith were able to develop a close relationship over so many years?
2. What core values helped Tubman and Keith develop a close friendship? How might these values affect relationships you have with other people?
3. Damon Keith is viewed as a ‘bridge builder’ by many of his friends. What does this mean? Can you think of “bridge builders” in your life? (p. 238)
4. Traditional events often provide opportunities for an easy exchange of ideas and plans. The Thanksgiving Dinner and the Soul Food Luncheon are two examples from Judge Keith’s life. Can you identify similar events in your life? What impact have these events had?

**Chapter 26:** “I don’t work on your plantation,” p. 247-265

1. In looking back at some of his life experiences, Judge Keith acknowledges several challenges and disappointments. Which of the events described in this chapter seem to have been most disturbing? Why?
2. A difficult issue facing Judge Keith in the 1990s was the future direction of the Detroit branch of the NAACP. What issues were involved in the topic? Have these issues been resolved? Can you provide examples of other organizations facing similar challenges? How were these organizations able to resolve the issues, or are the issues still unresolved?

**Chapter 27:** “Crusader for Justice; Into the Sunset,” p. 267-277

1. Shadows are the memories of the influences of other individuals and events on the lives of Elie Wiesel, Damon Keith, and each of us. How were the shadows of Wiesel, Keith and yourself similar? How were they different?
2. What shadows do you hope to leave as you begin, what Nelson Mandela calls “the end of the long walk”? (p. 375)

Compiled by Dr. James A. McConnell  
Michigan Council for History Education  
[jam1776@sbcglobal.net](mailto:jam1776@sbcglobal.net)  
January 6, 2016