



## The 1998 Joseph Branch Professionalism Award Recipient Wade M. Smith

By Wright T. Dixon, Jr.

This year's Professionalism Award goes to Wade Marvin Smith, who was born October 9, 1937, to Charlie B. and Ruth Carpenter Smith and raised in a mill village in Albemarle in humble yet, loving surroundings. Although times were depressed, the nature of his parents, his grandfather, who was the preacher of his church, and his grammar school principal and mentor, Mrs. B.C. Parker, created an early standard which Wade has met all his life. Because they had to work to support themselves, neither of his parents was able to go to college. Both he and his brother Roger were told that they must go to college, yet knew their parents would not be able to afford to send them.

Wade's early life was centered on the church and a young Christian life, which included reading the Bible and church services. The development of Wade's talent as a musician and singer arose from following the footsteps of his father who led the singing in their church. Wade developed his musical talents singing and learning to play musical instruments at home, in church, and on road trips with his father.

Mrs. Parker, the principal who saw Wade's potential, opened up life for him. She was the one who encouraged his parents to have him join the Cub Scouts, and have a Cub uniform like the other boys. Recognizing his talent in art and painting, she insisted that Wade had to have paints with which to paint, and that they should also take him to the mountains where he could really see what he had already painted.

Another mentor was his high school football coach and in a way, the football teams, which became a microcosm of getting ahead and "getting it done": that team lost only one game during Wade's time with them. Wade's collegial bent and the music given by his father led him to organize his own male quartet while in high school.

Wade had a scholarship to the School of Design and to play football at N.C. State, when he received the Morehead Scholarship and decided to enter Carolina instead. In addition to sports, he again organized a musical quartet. In law school, Wade's mentors were Dean Wettach, Professors Van Hecke and Dickson Phillips. When hired by Justice Carlyle Higgens of the Supreme Court as a law clerk, Wade gained another mentor and a view of lawyers and judges who showed how they practiced legal matters, with a lack of vain self-interest, which of course marks Wade now: not to take himself seriously but to take the law seriously. It wasn't long after coming to Raleigh that he organized the famous quartet, named, with Wade's flair for words, "Bloomsberry Park," which became a haven for a great part of Wade's adult life. He mentions that when people see him in public, they always talk about music and seldom anything about his cases or the practice of law.

Wade found in The Will Turner Hiking Club another source of pleasure and inspiration. Robert McMillan, a man who set criteria for many young lawyers, had started it. Wade enjoyed the comradery of the group. They mixed the toil of full days of hiking and camping out with nights around a campfire with lies and legends, religion and confession and, of course, a little singing: again, lawyers, who took the law seriously, but not themselves.

Wade has had few disappointments in his life. One, when he contracted asthma at the age of forty-eight. Typically, he has lived with it, stayed with his medication and the battle still continues. Professionally, his disappointment arises from the lack of leadership by lawyers, which is apparent today. Growing up, Wade saw lawyers who were not just those who tried cases, drafted wills, closed loans or crafted deals, but, in the wider role of leaders of the community, which is the hallmark of a profession rather

than a business.

Wade has had interests and his share of leadership in diverse fields, including a very successful political career in North Carolina. When faced with a choice of going forward with that most promising political career, Wade made his decision to be a lawyer and that alone. The decision, which he has never regretted, is as a full-time lawyer, even though his love for music and art remain a promising lure. Wade has been counsel in many large cases, the Jeffrey McDonald case probably receiving as much publicity as any. Unlike others who get involved in noteworthy or high visibility cases and try to vault into public notoriety by writing a book or try to become public figures themselves, Wade closed his file and went on to other things when the McDonald case was lost.

His pride in his practice comes typically in a case, while defending a notorious murderer at the life or death sentencing trial. He responds to the prosecutors speech to the jury of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" with "They say an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and you have heard it said, love your neighbor and hate your enemies but, I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons of your father in heaven." The pride and pleasure is not because the jury spared the murderer's life; but that shortly thereafter the prison chaplain called and told him the defendant, in for life, on his own had joined the church. Since then he has become a model prisoner and person. That is the power of the lawyer: not fame but to do your best.

This is Wade Smith, one who does his best with his law practice, his love of music, art and photography, and his life. At the close of the interview, not forgetting his sense of humor, Wade says, "You know, I really don't deserve this honor, but, I have asthma and I don't deserve that, either."