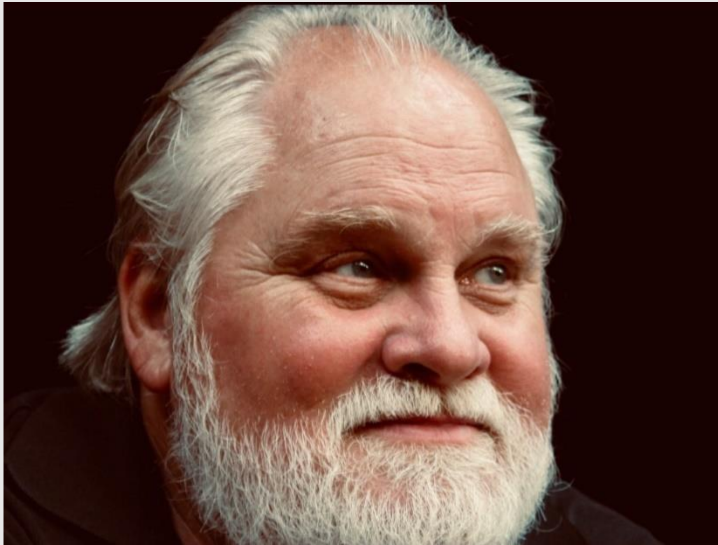
Dr. C. Courtney Elliott

August 28, 1941–September 13, 2014

A Legacy of Service



Born in the middle of a prairie wind in the shadow of oil and Indians, my father was the quintessential native son of a most dichotomous state, Oklahoma 1941. It was a land rich in oil fields and Midwest values but one laid bare with displaced souls. Would-be reservation roads spread out among Dust Bowl vestiges with an all-too-common intersection of poverty. Those social, economic, and cultural clashes formed the backbone of my father's values, passions, and life's work. His modest upbringing further imbued him with a dogmatic alignment with the poor and a penchant for picking fights on behalf of social justice issues that seemed orphaned by more powerful interests.

The son of Franklin and Bernadine Elliott, full-time shop owners and part-time singers, dad worked hard and played hard. He loaded boxcars after school with friends from his side of the tracks and the further outskirts of town and raised his fair share of innocent hell after the sun went down. He loved sports. He played football, basketball, and baseball for the Chickasha High

School Fighting Chicks, and his devotion to those sports, especially college basketball, never waned. He grew up Baptist, but with a healthy mistrust of organized religion and eventually, a thorough disgust for its propensity for hypocrisy.

Dad loved cars. He counted himself lucky to have come of age in the mid-1950s. The Elliott family was a Chrysler family. Back then, that meant Chrysler, DeSoto, Dodge, and Plymouth. In that era, cars were truly unique from one another, and car companies released automobiles every year with big design changes and stylish idiosyncrasies. It was easy back then to distinguish the make and model years of cars just by looking at their body curves and if they had a tail fin. But there were other clues, too: push-button gearshifts, rollout triangular aviator windows, and the more uncommon air conditioner.

Dad initially attended the University of Oklahoma. However, after a far more successful semester attending fraternity parties than classes, as well as a summer spent in Europe working on potato farms during the day and carousing with German women at night, his time as a collegiate Sooner was over. He ultimately received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology from Central State University in Edmond, Oklahoma, in 1963. After graduating, he began what would become a lifelong passion for and pursuit of social justice and equality issues, essentially in his own backyard. He took his grassroots, community organizing talents to the dirt floors of Native American communities as a Bureau of Indian Affairs social worker. That window into a life of seemingly endless, unmitigated poverty and inequality, especially for native children, lit a fire in my father. And that fire for justice raged with passion and indignation across five more decades, allowed only to extinguish when he did.

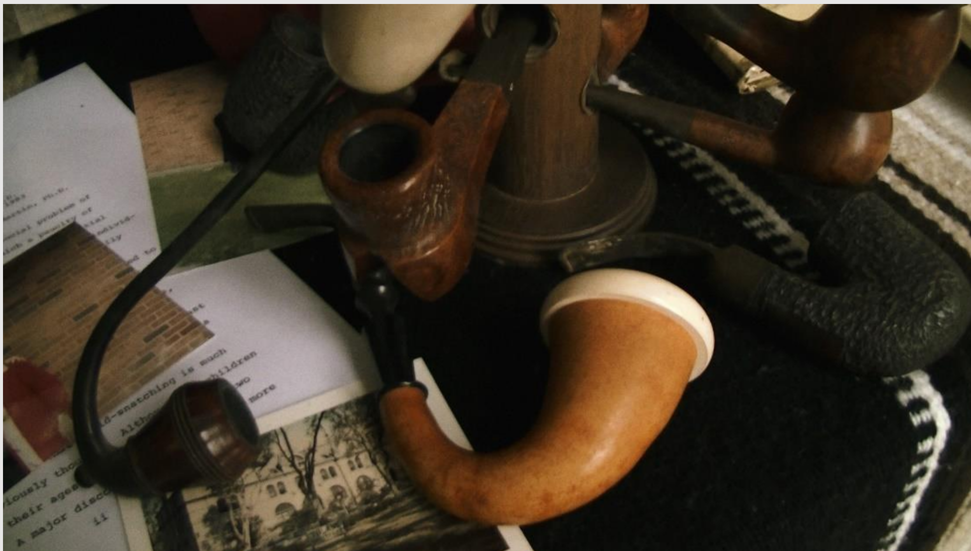
Eager to make a larger impact, my dad set off to New Orleans, Louisiana, to earn a Master's degree in Social Work from Tulane University. New Orleans and the famed French Quarter were worlds away from the boom-and-bust fields of Chickasha. Love, jazz, poetry, parties, hurricanes, and activism were the callings of the day. Phyllis Tanner was at Tulane in the same social work program as dad. They fell in love and lived in a small upstairs apartment overlooking the trolley tracks of Saint Charles Avenue. They frequented the now-famous hot spots like the Camellia Grill and Commander's Palace, where everything was served, from the best greasy hamburgers, fries, pies, and bottled beer to peel-and-eat shrimp, jambalaya, bread pudding, and scotch. In stark juxtaposition, they performed much of their fieldwork on behalf of foster children in the city's toughest neighborhoods in the lower ninth ward.

Midway through their degree, Hurricane Betsy interrupted their studies and lives, along with the entire region. Betsy was a bitch of a storm, powerful, dangerous, and erratic. She caught coastal communities up and down the Gulf Coast unprepared. The equivalent Category 4 storm, with 155 mph winds, came ashore in September 1965 near Grand Isle, Louisiana. Slow to weaken and lasting three full days, her destruction, measured in money alone, added up to well over one billion dollars. My parents recalled watching a fire burn slowly and steadily up the electric line from the street pole to the terminus, just feet outside their second-floor kitchen window. Once the fire found the fuse box, they lost power for nearly two weeks, like most of New Orleans. They spent time in the air-conditioned coolness of the only movie theater that still had electricity and, at night, cooked soon-to-spoil steaks with their fellow graduate students. However, they spent most of their time working on base at the Algiers Naval Air Station, where they helped run the city's largest shelter. They provided meals, lodging, and medical care for over 20,000 displaced citizens.

After graduating with a Master's degree in Social Work in the spring of 1966, dad returned home to Chickasha with his new wife, taking a job as the Executive Director of the Grady County Community Action Agency (CAA). The CAA was part of President Lyndon Johnson's Office of Economic Opportunity. Dad recalled with great pride the changes he effected in his old hometown and his early role in the Johnson-

era War on Poverty. Dad’s local work even earned him a private meeting with Sargent Shriver, one of President Lyndon Johnson’s point men on the War on Poverty and inaugural Director of the Peace Corps.

Nineteen sixty-seven ushered in two new and distinct jobs, one of which lasted a lifetime. He found himself the father of a confounding, redheaded, firebrand version of himself when mom gave birth to me on May 30, 1967. He also began a new chapter of community organizing as the lead training specialist for the Community Aid and Multi-Purpose Center at the University of Oklahoma, a 15 state, regional training center for Head Start and Neighborhood Aid projects. This was a new, more proactive, and sometimes-controversial role. It further fanned the flames inside of him for the power of direct action, political organizing, and general muckraking on behalf of those in society left outside looking in.



In the spring of 1968, academia once again took front and center in my dad’s world. He accepted an assistant professor position in the School of Social work at West Virginia University in Morgantown, West Virginia. He taught master’s level courses on social welfare policy and

community organizing, later serving as Dean of Admissions for the school of social work. As West Virginia and the country fell into turmoil, labor relations and union politics were never far from my dad's day-to-day organizing activities. He worked on countless community action projects throughout West Virginia. Keeping with what was quickly becoming his calling, these projects focused on rural poverty, healthcare, and children's rights. Rural Appalachian Mountain communities and company mining towns demanded most of the heavy lifting.

Like most community organizers in the region, my dad held many of his organizing meetings in railroad tunnels, caves, and old mines, far from the eyes of those less interested in the rights of workers, women, and children.

In 1975, dad moved to Tallahassee, Florida, to acquire his Ph.D. in Social Work at Florida State University. My mom and I sold the house in West Virginia and joined dad early the following year. Besides pursuing his degree at Florida State, he also served as Executive Director of the Florida chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, spearheading one of the most vocal anti-capital punishment advocacy groups in the country.

Mom traveled constantly as a human service consultant, so dad's primary role in Tallahassee, beyond school and advocacy, was that of Mr. Mom. Between cleaning fish I caught

and refused to eat, blasting Judy Collins from our living room stereo, and watching Bobby Bowden turn the Seminole football program into a dynasty, dad drove my friends and me around in a 1972 VW bus I would later dub "The eight-track with an engine in back."

In June 1980, we moved for my mom's work to Falls Church, Virginia, just outside of Washington, D.C. Dad accepted a job as an assistant professor of social work at the Catholic University of America in northwest D.C. During his time in Washington, dad became a powerful advocate, researcher, and agitator for the changes he most believed in. Along with his doctoral thesis, the first National Exploratory Study of Parental Kidnapping (known as Child Snatching), he authored over forty published articles, papers, speeches, and research studies. Among the most notable was the annual report on Child Abuse and Neglect. Now titled the Annual Report on Child Maltreatment, this research book published by the federal Health and Human Services Agency helps define new policy and budgetary initiatives for our nation's most vulnerable citizens. His other notable publications include the Kellogg Foundation research study on the state of foster care and adoption across the country and the early study of AIDS in state mental institutions nationwide. He also served on countless boards, advisory panels, and high-profile task forces. He was a national board member for Wider Opportunities for Women and the United Way. In addition, he was a member of the state planning committee for the White House Conference on Families, a consultant to the American Bar Association's Institute for Judicial Administration, and a member of the Walter R MacDonald & Associates, Inc. team that helped develop the National Child Abuse Data System.

Although his impact on the nation's social ills was more driven later in life by influential research and powerful policy advocacy, his roots in the direct-action efforts of the 1960s were

always a part of his ethos. I remember the day my parents came to me, while barely a junior in high school, with a question and a proposal. They asked if I would like to take part in a protest to pressure Congress to divest from the Apartheid government and economy of South Africa. When they received my immediate, exuberant, and unthought-out, "Yes," they made me wait a week and then explain why I thought it would make a difference. Before the month was out, I was in the back of a police van with my parents, in handcuffs, after being arrested with Randall Robinson and a group from Trans Africa, running the civil disobedience actions at the South African embassy. It would take the next two years of public pressure, but Congress finally divested our country's interest in the hateful machinery known as Apartheid.

One of my father's proudest achievements, and one that harkened back to his days as a front-line organizer in West Virginia, was his creation of the progressive think tank and advocacy group at the Catholic University of America called the Institute for Social Justice (ISJ). ISJ worked on national and international projects related to homelessness, AIDS, refugees, international development, and child welfare.

Through a Fulbright visiting professor grant in 1989, dad taught community organizing and economic development at the Catholic University of Chile in Santiago. During that time, the plebiscite referendum to decide the fate of the fascist dictator Augusto Pinochet was in full swing. Dad served as an election monitor and advisor to the mainly widowed-women-driven independence movement. I remember crisscrossing the country with my parents photographing a startling array of the word, No, hastily spray-painted in the dead of night, and the word, Yes, government-sanctioned and beautifully stenciled. My family witnessed the end of Chile's cruelest era. No, won.

As dad’s professional career came to a close, after years of being a professor, a community organizer, researcher, and lecturer, he took on the role most needed and appreciated by me. He was the principal strategist, lobbyist, and point man for my dreams, especially my dream of making a life in music and art. Both of my parents showed ridiculous amounts of patience, perseverance, and optimism for my insistence on living a life in the arts. They drank the required alcohol and ate the expected meals at every bar that dared hire their fourteen-year-old son to sing. And they did so much more.

My career ups and downs were already a decade old when my parents moved to Nashville to be near me full time and part of the music my friends and I were making. Along with the help of my mom, dad was the chief booking agent, publisher, editor, financier, and devil’s advocate for all the critical crossroads in my musical journey. He was the first person I spoke to after a show, an industry meeting, or during the initial sparks of another hair-brained scheme. We debated, argued, dreamed up, and forced through countless efforts to create success and happiness in a field so often wrought with emotional hazards. The music business was not an uncommon battleground for him. And it was a battle in which I think he took great pleasure in fighting alongside me.

A few years before my father's death, he and I traveled back to our old hometown. We attended his 50th high school reunion, went to a Chickasha Fighting Chicks football game, and walked the halls of his old high school. We visited the old offices of the Community Action Agency and drove past the Bureau of Indian Affairs office in Anadarko. Both places proved to be the first stepping stones in a life dedicated to the service of others. We crossed the century-old railroad tracks, past the grown-over fields that once housed the World War II German prisoner of war camp, and up to 302 South 16th Street, his old house. It was in serious disrepair with an unfamiliar quality, like a brittle and broken black-and-white picture. We visited his parents' graves, the ones most likely responsible for the DNA portion of my musical talents, and then ate BBQ on a picnic table in Borden Park, where he rode his horse June sixty years earlier. We smiled in recognition of the awesome arc of our lives, laughed about the ridiculousness of it all, and got back to scheming for the next move in the master plan of me becoming famous.

My father's path took him far from the red clay hills of Oklahoma. And decades later, those pastures of plenty were scarcely recognizable to him or me. Boomtowns bust and grow old. Friends, once hell-raising and trailblazing, grow old. I suppose that even fathers and sons grow old. But fortunately, their dreams do not.