

TONY CLAYTON

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Putting skin in the game

For someone who self-deprecatingly refers to himself on his *LinkedIn* profile as “Just an ole country lawyer”, Louisiana District Attorney Tony Clayton is a man of myriad accomplishments. The deliberate understatement on his social media bio is both endearing and revealing of his character – disarmingly humble and remarkably grounded, despite a plethora of prestigious legal achievements.

With his penetrating intellect and trenchant analytical rigour, not to mention sartorial elegance, gracious *bonhomie* and fulsome smile, newly elected DA Tony, 58, is a harmonious

marriage of substance and style – a man clearly approaching the acme of a career already strewn with “*the glittering prizes*” of professional success, while still inordinately proud of his where he has come from, and yet still driven by a sense of there being more to do, and to give back – a man resolutely determined to go even further in the pursuit of justice for the people of Louisiana.

There is no doubt that Tony cuts a prepossessing figure, both in the courtroom and outside of it. With his debonair Creole charm and irrepressibly dapper demeanour, complete with cufflinks and pocket square, Tony effortlessly exudes charisma, panache and



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PAULA CLAYTON

together – is rightfully punished. Yet it is a task he has never balked at but embraced whole-heartedly throughout a long and distinguished career as a public prosecutor. *"The key,"* he says, is simply *"putting skin in the game."*

A man adept at employing verbal pyrotechnics in the courtroom, and, when necessary, engaging in fierce forensic jousting in the pursuit of truth, Tony is not only a force of nature but also a force for a tangible good in the lives of the people he represents. Embodying the famous maxim from Terence Rattigan's play *The Winslow Boy*, he has a *"Let right be done!"* attitude to his courtroom battles, one always determined by the principles of integrity, decency, and duty.

With the polished tones and Ciceronian eloquence which befit a seasoned prosecutor, Tony epitomizes both a selfless dedication to public service and a tireless quest for justice for the people of Louisiana.

Despite his many achievements, humility is the measure of the man – rare for someone who also manages to strike fear into the hearts and minds of those he is prosecuting.

Animated by an aspiration to build safer communities, Tony abides by a code of moral rectitude. His wish to serve Louisiana by extirpating crime – which stymies the ability of law-abiding citizens to flourish – is both palpable and inspirational.

Genuine talent and a passion for ensuring the law is upheld and the guilty are punished, together with a Stakhanovite work ethic, have seen Tony rise from humble rural beginnings to be the holder of one of the highest public offices in the state.

gravitas. Moreover, he combines this with mental agility, razor-sharp acumen and a proselytizing zeal for doing right by the victims of crime. Always immaculately suited and coiffured, his speech is couched in the mellifluous, beguiling vowels of Southern Louisiana.

He has hitherto dedicated his working life to the colossal, nay Sisyphean task of ensuring that criminality – the scourge which rends the human bonds binding the fabric of our society

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Family Background

Of mulatto Creole heritage on his father's side, with family hailing from Bunkie, Louisiana, Tony's grandfather worked on the railroads. But after Grandfather Clayton was forced to do a midnight flit due to white racist intimidation, Tony himself grew up in the small town of Addis, of humble, hard-working stock who toiled long hours cleaning the railway yards.

The product of a stable, loving family unit with a very present, *"hands on"* father whose draconian discipline instilled fear into the young boy, Tony speaks poignantly about the impact of his own father on his teenage development:

"Daddies being in a home will make a difference. My dad's dead and I'm still scared of him." He continues with candor, "I knew that when I was in high school and my buddies would say "Hey man, let's go do this dude." I'm like, "Dude, my dad's crazy, he would come here and spank me in front of y'all. I'm not doing it." So that fear that he instilled in me to do right by folks when no one's looking, I still have it today."

A father himself at the age of 21 while still in college (his family helped

raise his baby until he had graduated), Tony sees the nuclear family unit as the backbone of society, and by extension, the breakdown of the family structure – with absentee parents, and especially a lack of positive male role models – as one of the principal causes of errant masculinity which inexorably led to waywardness, delinquency and, ultimately, crime.

Shadism + Good Hair

When growing up, Tony was encouraged by his fair-skinned grandmother to be conscious of his darker complexion and to actively date light-skinned girls, so that his children would have *"good hair"* – an expression familiar not only in the South but tragically, across the whole country, indicative of the levels of toxic self-hate which the twin evils of slavery and racism engendered within the black psyche, due to European aesthetic ideals being held up as superior. As it happens, he did end up marrying a Creole girl, but not specifically heeding his grandmother's advice, since he asserts that, *"I dated whomever I wanted to date."*

“There were no African American lawyers when I started in 1991. I’m told since Louisiana’s inception there was only one. I wanted to go back but I was told that as an African American boy, I would not make it. So, I set out to prove them wrong, and they were wrong.”

Education

Tony graduated from Brusly High School in 1981 and, after working on the railroads for several years in the family tradition (of which he is noticeably proud), subsequently returned to study and enrolled at Southern University. He had initially wanted to go to medical school and become a doctor, but, serendipitously for law and order in Louisiana, he “met a girl while an undergrad who was dating a guy who was in law school.”

When Cupid’s arrow strikes, we are all powerless to resist, and Tony was no exception. This precipitated an immediate change of direction and thus an enthusiasm for the law was born, to impress his Innamorato. Of his law degree, Tony says:

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A proud alumnus (graduating in 1988) of Southern University A + M in Baton Rouge – the largest historically black college which effectively helped to educate, and thus create, the black Louisiana middle class, he is also a Cum Laude graduate of Southern University Law Center (1991).

Legal Career

Called to the Louisiana State Bar in 1991, having passed at his first attempt, Tony has practised law for over 30 years. After winning his first-ever case defending a dope dealer, despite being scared to death and saying to himself, “Oh Lord, if I lose this case, this guy’s going to kill me”, he was encouraged to start prosecuting by his mentor, and former president of Southern University Jesse Stone, one of the few black lawyers from Shreveport. Although initially reluctant, he quickly fell in love with prosecuting and has never looked back since.

He simultaneously started a private practice with his wife Paula, herself a Southern law graduate. As he explains, “So I was like, why don’t we practice law together? And she said, yeah, let’s try it. And so, we had a little snowball stand that we had converted into a law office.” In a consummately heart-warming, “rags to riches” story, after initial privations, loans and only one business phone line, within 5 years the couple had made their first million dollars.

Tony began his criminal justice career in 1992 for the East Baton Rouge Parish District Attorneys. In 1997 an appointment was handed down from the Louisiana Supreme Court as an



ad-hoc judge for the 19th Judicial District Court. He then returned to the East Baton Rouge DA’s office, before heading felony trials. He has now worked as a prosecutor for the last 17 years, trying almost every major felony case involving violent crimes, with an almost perfect record of convictions, and today is a managing partner in the Port Allen law firm of Clayton, Frugé, Ward.

Famed for his oratorical prowess, Tony has tried many high-profile murder cases, among the most notable and publicized convictions being serial killers Derrick Todd Lee and Sean Gillis, who, acting separately, killed 15 women across the capital region in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Gratifyingly, plaudits for his work have been many. In 2015, Tony was named “Prosecutor of the Year” by Crimefighters of Louisiana (a victim advocacy organization), received the Home Run Hitters Award by the National District Attorneys’ Association, and has served as both

Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Southern University Board of Supervisors. Elected District Attorney in 2020, Tony replaced 18th Judicial District Attorney Richard J. Ward Jr., who retired after nearly 30 years in charge of the prosecutor’s office.

Community Efforts

Tony is animated by an ardent desire to give back to his community and cites his initial inspiration to succeed in the legal field as chiefly wanting to disprove the naysayers and the doubters.

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Family Values

A self-confessed family man, Tony is happily married to Paula, also of Creole heritage, and is the proud father of

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5 children – Brilliant-Pierre, Austin, Jene’, Brandon and TJ. As he quips with jocularly, *“I actually didn’t go to law school for me; I went to law school to follow the girl and I ended up catching that girl and marrying that girl.”*

With strong religious convictions, his wife and children are evidently the bedrock of his worldview and of his success – one based on conjugal felicity and the compassion which comes from the life-affirming and nurturing bond of children.

Philanthropy

A dedicated philanthropist, especially where his alma mater Southern is concerned, Tony is conscious of his debt to that august academic institution and is exceedingly grateful how it took him – *“a boy from the cane fields of Louisiana”* and made him into the man he is today.

Whilst he readily acknowledges that his ego would prohibit him from having a charitable organization in his own name, he is aware of the importance of setting an example when giving back, and his munificence has encouraged many other local African American businessmen to do so too. Tony recently donated 1 million dollars to his alma Southern University to help student-athletes

But most of his philanthropy is reserved for children. As he readily admits, *“I’m just a big push over when it comes to kids. I tear up when I see these TV commercials with kids suffering abuse, so*

as tough as I am in the courtroom, I’m just weak about them.”

To this end, he sponsors several junior sports teams in his local community.

“Oftentimes the kids with the soccer team, the basketball team, they come to me. And so, I find myself having to fund a lot of that and I’ll make them put my name on the jersey, so they’ll know that I had something to do with it. Not for the sake of blowing my name up, but I’m like, “Hey, let the parents know I’m putting some skin in the game.”

Views on Race & Racism

When it comes to what W.E.B. Du Bois famously termed *“the problem of the twentieth century”*, Tony is an unashamed advocate of the Booker T. Washington approach to combating racism. *“I’m a Booker T Washington kind of guy,”* he admits. *“I think people ought to all be equal, but I don’t think government ought to make everybody equal.”*

Keen to be a visible role model for African American boys, he is conscious of the ways in which Dr. King’s dream of integration has had a profound – and in some ways, perhaps even negative effect – on his community. As he explains, *“What if Tony Clayton had not built his estate out here in the middle of a community where there are no little black kids to see me? Had I put this home in the ‘hood, then the kids would say, you know what? I can go to school. I can be like Tony. Because they have nothing to look up to. They have no role models.”*

On some level, he feels that black self-sufficiency has been adversely impacted by the desire for integration, as it *“drains the culture”* and has ironically resulted in depriving black children of hope in wanting to see faces like theirs around them achieving within their own community.

Having travelled extensively in Africa, especially in South Africa, and thus seen firsthand the way the locals live, both in Johannesburg and the Limpopo region, Tony feels a strong kinship with the Motherland and asserts we can learn a lot from the continent. *“Africa has a unique sense about it, and we can learn a lot from it, both good and bad. You can learn that people will persevere no matter what, that we are resilient. Then you can also learn what not to do from Africa.”*

Tony is also never one to use racism as a crutch – something which is anathema to him. His sagacious advice on this topic is unequivocal and impassioned: *“Don’t use your race as a crutch and don’t use whatever your ancestors have gone through as a question. Use it as a guidance tool to keep you from navigating back into those waters.”* *The key, he believes, once again, is simply “putting skin in the game.”*

Transcending Race

Today, as part of an elite group of one of only four African Americans to occupy the office of District Attorney in Louisiana, Tony is admittedly conscious of race, but refuses to be imprisoned or stymied by it in any way. He maintains that his election to DA was not race-based. *“I can say it’s a true testament to the people in our three parishes that people did not base this on race.”* For Tony, his

legal prowess transcends the vagaries of melanin. As he explains, *“Most of my clients are white. It’s about if you’re a good lawyer, that’s what people tend to gravitate to.”*

Tony is also wary of the racial stereotypes society has made us all internalize. By way of illustration, in 2009, he co-authored *Blood Bath*, a book about the hunt for the African American Louisiana serial killer Derrick Todd Lee. In it, he recounts how the search for the serial killer was initially hampered by the overwhelming perception that the serial killer had to be *“a white man in a white pick-up truck”*, due to the erroneous belief that black people simply didn’t do stuff like that. *“So through ignorance, more and more folks were being killed.”*

Identity

In terms of his own racial identity, Tony is proudly black, and yet equally proud of his Creole heritage (*“Spanish, French, African-American, white – “the whole nine yards”*). For him, the two identities are not mutually exclusive, nor should they be. He even has some Ethiopian in his DNA, and often points it out when talking to clients, a firm subscriber to the humanistic, universalist position that *“primarily, we are all mixed.”*

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Nevertheless, he is still painfully conscious of the brutal historic racial geography of the part of Louisiana

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in which he lives. *“The blacks lived on this water because the whites were afraid of malaria mosquitoes”.* With this knowledge, he purchased part of a former slave plantation, Austerlitz plantation in Pointe Coupee, for his current domicile, as his grandmother’s family had worked there as slaves and were reputedly buried in the vicinity.

Cognizant of the black and Indian mélange in the area – a veritable racial and cultural melting pot – but also of the way in which Creoles were ostracized by both black and white communities, Tony is proud that his own house was built by Creole mulattoes, and converses with pride about his forebears, the sure sign of a man secure in his Black Creole identity, culture, and history.

“The blacks used to live on this water, (False River in Pointe Coupee parish where during slavery blacks would usher the crops to flatboats to be shipped to New Orleans) now I’m one of only a handful of blacks who live on this river. The land and homes are mostly waterfront homes akin to a Martha Vineyards of the south.”

Experiences of Racism

Thankfully, by his own admission, growing up Tony never experienced “harsh, harsh racism” – somewhat unusual for a black man in the South – although he was aware of things that would today be considered ‘micro aggressions’.

A staunch and unapologetic proponent of diversity, he believes that *“the country is where it is today because of this diversity”* and that *“those countries that adopt diversity tend to go further in life.”*

He also believes that the eradication of racism is chiefly down to education and exposure. He powerfully cites the fact that his son (who is now in high school) recently had a party at their home *“and out of 100 people, I guess 85 of them were white kids – and they had a good time.”* The conclusion of his sentence is telling and affords hope.

God & Religion

A devout Baptist, Tony has a strong Christian faith that shines through, both in conversation and in his actions. For him, it is God who regulates his moral compass. *“I think everybody has God within them and that God is that person, that thing or that beam that tells you don’t do that when no one’s looking. And that is the moral competence that takes you the right way.”*

Attitude as District Attorney

Tony’s aim in his new role as DA is to continue running the tight ship established by his predecessor Ricky Ward, and he has already adopted his philosophy of prosecution. He has also been influenced by Doug Moreau. Again, asserting his ability to see beyond race, he explains, *“Both of*

those guys are white, and they were very impactful in the decisions that I made as a prosecutor. Although they are white, they were like family to me. So, I don’t see colour at all.”

Tough on Murder, but Compassionate

As DA, Tony strongly advocates being tough and uncompromising when it comes to murder. *“If you take the life of someone else unjustifiably, you forfeit your right to walk with the rest of them.”* But he also advocates knowing when to be compassionate, humane, and broad-minded, especially with regards to minor offences, articulating this with a refreshing degree of realpolitik. *“I’m also that guy that if he sees some little kid with a joint on him and he’s about to graduate from LSU or Southern, I’m not prosecuting him. Let him go take his little butt (a marijuana conviction will taint their resume), get a job. I’m not going to hamper him and put that kid away.”*

Tough stance on Juvenile Crime

Tony is equally adamant in his resolve to deal severely with the juvenile crime epidemic increasingly affecting the Iberville, West Baton Rouge and Pointe Coupee parishes, insisting that something must be done to ensure that the alarming spate of armed vehicle burglaries and shootings by teenagers cease with alacrity.

As he stoically muses, *“You forfeit your right to be with the rest of us, when you take a weapon out, and anoint yourself God, and take the life from another human being. I don’t care how old you are.”*

Yet Tony – a firm believer in “education for liberation” – has also proposed a new strategy to deal with the problem. As

prisons increasingly fill to capacity with violent young offenders, he wants to explore ways to blend incarceration with education. To this end, he wishes to build a new juvenile detention facility, one in which “they won’t be listening to rap music.” Instead, “they would listen to the theories of algebra, history, the origin of mankind.”

According to his vision of rehabilitation through academic instruction, young offenders would attend class five days a week and would learn subjects like Chinese, math, algebra, and trigonometry, which he feels would make a seminal difference in their lives.

“That student could go to Harvard, Yale, LSU, Southern or another university and become a productive citizen who couldn’t care less about taking guns. I would make him pay his debt to society for armed robbery and then make him a productive citizen. When I see them in jail, I want to see them in books.”

His optimism in the efficacy of such traditional educational methods is both touching and infectious: *“The Tony Clayton model will work. I guarantee 80 or 90 per cent will go to college and the other 20 per cent will choose to be a bricklayer, but they will never go back to their old craziness because by then, they’d be too smart.”*

Somewhat controversially, he is also willing to try offenders aged 15 as adults. *“If they are 15 (and they don’t complete my juvenile program, except for cold-blooded murder) then I will try them as an adult.”* His warning is bombastic, uncompromising, and stark: *“I am not compromising with their ass on this, and if they’re old enough to purchase a gun, they’re old enough to be tried as an adult.”*

Future Plans

Tony sees a direct correlation between poverty, lack of education and a high murder rate. He is therefore keen to harness the power of the black church and involve them in helping fight crime by encouraging education and by taking their ministry to the streets. He feels that churches can make a tangible difference to young people in this way. *"Because what happens if you have those little black kids, whether they are in the black community, the white community, or the Creole community, if he's on the street and he's unemployed, it's festering. It's a formula that will erupt in some type of crime."*

Personality

Affable, sincere, and down-to-earth, Tony can at times be forthright (one would expect nothing less from a DA), but his convictions are heart-felt. He speaks from copious experience with intellectual rigour and a profound understanding of the challenges which face the communities he is employed to serve and is wholly dedicated to protecting. He admits that he likes helping people who have been wronged get their wrongs righted and sees his role as holding others to account for social injustice, to make sure that *"big folks don't take advantage of little folks."*

Conclusion

"Putting some skin in the game" seems to be Tony's personal mantra or at least one of his favourite expressions. In fact, the phrase perfectly encapsulates

his philanthropic spirit, his desire to constantly give back to others, his belief in the efficacy of shared endeavours and of leading by example.

"I believe that everyone has to put some skin in the game. I believe you must give back; you must give back to the poor, you have to give back to the last school. So that's what I tried to do."

Conveyed with clarity and conviction, his over-arching message is one of rousing uplift: *"Hey, get off the gas, you know, get into this and fight with us and let's make this country and this world better."*

Motivated by such intrinsically noble, altruistic ideals, Tony remains powerfully driven and yet also manages to convey a sense of contentment. Full of equanimity and with a philosophical approach to the things that really matter in life, he says, *"I don't ever want to question God, but I'm blessed, and I respect him. It's simple – just do right by your fellow man."* Intensely aware of the many blessings he has been given, namely *"a healthy family, healthy children, parents living long"*, Tony's humility is itself humbling.

A man of probity, courage and boundless compassion for those less fortunate, Tony Clayton is not only a fearless prosecutor, a decisive leader and a self-made man of action but also a beacon, a guide and an inspiration to others – someone both children and adults alike can look up to and emulate. To his credit, his enduring legacy, both legal and philanthropic, will doubtless be that of a proud Creole man who put a lot of his own skin in the game.

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