



Thursday, Sept. 17, 2020

A promotional poster for the 2020 Vision for Leadership Conference at Baylor Law. The background is green. At the top, it says '2020 VISION FOR LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE AT BAYLOR LAW PRESENTS'. Below that is the title 'THE LAWYER AS LEADER' in large, bold, yellow and white letters. Underneath the title, it lists the date and times: 'SEPTEMBER 17, 2020 | 4PM EDT | 3PM CDT | 2PM MDT | 1PM PDT'. The featured speaker is 'JOHN GRISHAM', identified as a '#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR'. A smaller photo of John Grisham is shown next to the text 'INTERVIEWED BY TALMAGE BOSTON, SHACKELFORD, BOWEN, MCKINLEY & NORTON, LLP, AUTHOR OF RAISING THE BAR'. The Baylor University School of Law logo is in the bottom left. In the bottom right, it says 'ATTORNEYS EARN ONE HOUR OF ETHICS CLE CREDIT'. A large portrait of a man in a suit is on the right side of the poster.

John Grisham, author of *A Time to Kill*, *The Firm*, *The Pelican Brief*, and a broad array of other perennial best-selling books, is interviewed by distinguished attorney and accomplished author Talmage Boston. The dialog focuses upon the imperative for lawyers to lead in the many venues in which they live and work. The interchange between Mr. Grisham and Mr. Boston is wide-ranging, but anchored in a siren call to lead in the public and private sectors.

Topics include: (i.) how Grisham has used his novels to address wrongs and inequities within our legal system, as he has done in *The Innocent Man*, *The Guardians*, and *The Appeal*; (ii.) how he is using his *Theo Boone* series to teach kids and adolescents about the legal system; (iii.) his thoughts about, and involvement in, the Innocence Project movement; (iv.) the importance of legal aid and access-to-justice programs; and (v.) advancing the cause of the [No Kid Hungry program](#).

Brad Toben:

So you know from the announcements that have gone out, it was a surprise. John Grisham is going to be our special speaker to wrap up the visionary conference that has been put together so masterfully by Liam and by Stephen and our other colleagues. We've appreciated your being with us all week and we believe that there have been so many ideas that have been placed upon the table that are going to be take-off points for very important ventures and research and extra leadership in the years to come.

Today, I have the pleasure of introducing Talmage Boston. I'll get right to the point. John Grisham would not be joining us today, but for Talmage. Talmage and John Grisham have a relationship that goes back a good ways and it was Talmage who reached out to create this surprise for our audience. Talmage and I, in turn, have known each other for a long time. Talmage is a partner with Shackelford, Bowen, McKinley, and Norton in the metroplex.

He is a distinguished trial lawyer and I think I can best describe him as being a giant in the State Bar of Texas. He has a fantastic trial record and perhaps more important for the point today is that he is a very high profile leader within the bar and within the public square here in Texas. A couple of years ago, he was honored by the Texas Bar Foundation with the Terry Lee Grantham Memorial Award, which is one of the highest awards you can receive as a practicing lawyer in the state of Texas and it gives heed to the fact that the recipient has played an extraordinary role, not only in the profession, but also even going beyond the profession.

Talmage is an inveterate history buff and he has, on so many occasions, entertained audiences by speaking to and interviewing other experts regarding leadership and, in many instances, leadership in the context of extraordinary president that our nation has had over the course of its history. He's been here at Baylor Law School on several occasions to the delight of our students, faculty, and staff at the university community. Talmage is going to be interviewing Mr. Grisham today and I will say that he is a very talented interviewer. This is a common type of venue in which he finds himself before audiences.

Talmage Boston:

Thank you, Dean Toben. It's certainly a great honor to be a part of this conference and for John to be available at the last minute, realizing the topics that are being covered and the role of the lawyer as leader. His stepping up really puts an exclamation point at the end of the conference. John does not need an introduction. Of course, he started out as a practicing lawyer, but found fame and fortune writing fiction and with each year, he becomes more of a leader in important national efforts, whether it's for the Innocence Project or for access to justice or, most recently, on addressing

childhood hunger in the country. John, welcome virtually to Texas and to this conference.

John Grisham: Hello, Talmage. Happy to be here.

Brad Toben: Welcome.

Talmage Boston: John, let's get started on the lawyer as leader and review your life and how that topic keeps winding itself into different parts of what you've done. Once you realized one day that you were not going to become a major league baseball player, you decided to finish up college and go to law school at Ole Miss. After you graduated from law school in 1981, you started out as a solo practitioner in a small town, handling a wide variety of cases and matters -- basically taking whatever walked in the door that might pay something. After doing that three years, you kept on lawyering, but you pursued the traditional lawyer leadership path and tried your hand in politics. And, in fact, you were successful. You served six years in the Mississippi state legislature. What motivated you to pursue elective office when you were a young man?

John Grisham: First of all, Talmage, it's good to see you again. Thanks to Dean Toben. I'm happy to be here and happy to take part and happy to pinch hit for James Baker. I'll get him back one day. He'll have to pinch hit for me. But delighted to be here and look forward to the next hour and talking law and politics and baseball with you.

Politics was something in the back of my mind when I was in law school. Many years ago, back in the '50s and '60s, half the legislature in Mississippi was made up of law students from Ole Miss and they would take off the spring semester every other year, not every year. They'd go to Jackson for three months and serve as lawmakers and it's quite a tradition. Most of our governors a long time ago had been from Ole Miss and were also members of the House and they got involved in politics that way.

I was living in suburban Memphis, that's where I grew up, in Mississippi, just across the state line. And at a young age, I knew that the guy who was from our district in the State House was beatable. I wanted to run in 1979 while I was in law school because I knew I could beat him; but my father talked me out of it and that was probably a good move. But by 1983, I was raring to go. One reason I went back to my hometown was to practice law and my wife was from there, as were our families. But also, I wanted to run for office in 1983 for the State House and I did and got myself elected.

I took off to Jackson every other year for three or four months. The campaign was a lot of fun, but the job was not much fun. I was three hours away from home trying to maintain a law office, my wife was having babies,

and life was pretty complicated. I never really took to public service. I realized once I got elected that although I got 65 percent of the votes when I ran, once elected, everybody said they voted for me and wanted something from me – from jobs to favors to birth certificates to whatever. I had no staff and so I had to do it all by myself and I just really got tired of the constituent service. You know what, Talmage? I got tired of the voters; and when you're a politician and you get tired of the voters, you quit. So, I didn't last very long in politics.

Talmage Boston: As your political career was ending in 1990, that was about the time your writing career started. *A Time to Kill* came out the year before in 1989. At first, it didn't sell real well. It came back later and became number 1 and then *The Firm* came out in '91 and, of course, it was followed by a string of legal thriller best-sellers that allowed you to retire from practicing law and devote yourself entirely to writing. But there was something that happened at law school that influenced you a little bit. Talk about your law professor Robert Khayat and what happened at the end of that semester in his class.

John Grisham: Robert Khayat was an All-American football player at Ole Miss back in the glory years when Ole Miss won two national titles, late '50s, early '60s and it was a national power. He was an All-American, and then he played for the Redskins briefly. He has the distinction of being the only man we know of in history who dated back-to-back Miss Americas. Ole Miss had back-to-back Miss Americas when he was there and he liked ladies and so he got all the girls. So after he played one or two seasons with the Redskins, and got burned out on football, he came back to law school, stayed there, and became a professor. And he taught torts and other courses.

I met him in the fall of 1978 when I was a first-year student. He was my torts professor and he was very charismatic. He later became chancellor at Ole Miss and served for 15 years, and also worked for the NCAA. He was a great guy and we're still friends and talk all the time.

During his first semester torts exam, which was one of those classic four hour brutal exams we all suffered through, he had four questions. And they were these half page questions that described things that would never happen in real life, but you've got to figure out what the legal issues are and solve them. And I got to number four and it was an impossible factual scenario and I just didn't get it. I didn't understand what the question was about, and I was about out of time as happens all the time. And so, there was one central character in the story that made up the question and I just started writing about this guy. I wrote pages and pages and pages and it was just B.S. That's all I could do. I was just filling the pages in the blue book.

When I went back in January to get my grades, long before the internet so nothing was posted online, I picked up my exam from Dr. Khayat, and my

grade was a lot better than I expected. So I was reading the exam, and came to the last question, and there were red marks all over the page. At the very bottom he had written, "Although you missed most of the legal issues in this problem, you have a real talent for fiction." We both remember that. About 10 years later when *A Time to Kill* came out, it was not a big success, but he called me and he said, "Do you remember your torts exam?" I said, "Oh yeah, I'll never forget it." He said, "Well, I told you so."

Talmage Boston: As evidenced by that answer and all your books, you are a great storyteller and certainly much of your fiction writing is pure entertainment. You're very open about the fact that you're not trying to be the next Dostoevsky--you're just writing to entertain the readers. You do a great job of it, but particularly in recent years, at least in part, your writing has become purpose-driven. There's *The Confession* which has some angles on the death penalty that are important. And, of course, *The Appeal*, which was set in Mississippi, and was actually based on a true story from West Virginia, about the evils of partisan political election of judges. So, it seems like more and more you're coming up with stories that demonstrate flaws in our legal system that need to be corrected. It makes you, almost, but not quite, a crusader. What inspired you to start creating plots that zeroed in on some of the glaring defects and major wrongdoing in America's justice system?

John Grisham: Probably *The Innocent Man* that came out 15 years ago. I think that's when things began to change for me. It's the only non-fiction book I've written. I'd practiced law for ten years and most of my clients came from court-appointed criminal cases because I wanted to be in the courtroom. So I did a lot of criminal defense work and I never had a client I thought was wrongfully convicted. In my little section of Mississippi, our judicial district, we had good judges, we had good prosecutors, we knew the police, and everything was played straight up. I missed the concept of wrongful conviction. And when I started writing, I somehow missed the first big wave of DNA exonerations -- the high profile exonerations that began in the late '90s.

Then I stumbled across a story about a guy in Oklahoma who came within five days of being executed who had been the second-round draft pick of the Oakland A's in 1972. He and I were the same age. In his little section of Oklahoma -- Ada, Oklahoma -- people thought he was going to be the next Mickey Mantle, who was also from Oklahoma. Ron Williamson, the player, the star, certainly thought he was going to be a great ballplayer, but he didn't make it. He had some injuries, picked up some bad habits, came back home, and was framed for a murder in his town. He was a high school sports hero in the same town that turned on him, prosecuted him, convicted him, and sent him off to death row for a crime he had nothing to do with.

He started showing signs of being bipolar and having schizophrenia and other mental problems in prison, and he totally collapsed in prison. It was just a great story! And I found out about it reading his obituary in 2004. It was a *New York Times* obituary. There in the *Times* was a picture of Ron standing in court the day he was exonerated. He had on this ill-fitting suit and looked ten years older than he was, and he was about to walk out free after eleven years of being locked up.

And the story just hit me hard. We were the same age, same race, same economic background, from the same section of the country, had the same religious background, and this guy had gone to death row. It was just a fascinating journey. I took off to Oklahoma and began researching, and got surprised every day. The story grew and grew, and it took me into the world of wrongful convictions. I realized for the first time how many of them we have and how many innocent people are in prison still today. And I have not been the same since.

I still correspond with some of these guys I met in prison, and we're trying to get them out. I take on other, not cases, but people I know and who are locked up. I serve on the board of the Innocence Project. Yesterday, for example, I spoke to both the Governor and the Attorney General in my home state of Virginia about the cases of people who are trying to get out. So it's something that's become a cause for me and it makes for great fiction. Every wrongful conviction is a fantastic story from a storytelling point-of-view because of the injustice, the suffering, the cost. They're just incredible stories. I wish I could write them all.

I've written confessional stories set in Texas about the question, "What are we going to do as a nation when we wake up one day and realize that we know by clear DNA proof that we just killed the wrong guy?" It hasn't happened yet, that we know for a fact that we've executed innocent people, but there's not that clear DNA proof, and what's going to happen to our system when that happens? So, I was really enthralled with that issue and that was the book I wrote. *The Guardians* came out last year and it was about wrongful convictions. I've probably done enough of it for a while in the world of fiction and there are other stories to write, but this issue of innocent people in prison has really prompted me to take a long hard look at our criminal justice system and think about issues like mass incarceration and disparities and race and all kinds of issues that still bug me big time.

Talmage Boston: I know you've been on the board of the Innocence Project for many years and you've certainly raised the profile of that organization. For this audience, talk about some of the things the Innocence Project has accomplished that has advanced the ball in the world of criminal justice or, at least, in the lives of some people.

John Grisham: Number One: We have walked out 370 innocent people with DNA testing. There are about 50 Innocence Projects around the country, some come and go, most are attached to a law school, a few are free standing, and anybody can start one. They're all terribly underfunded, but they work as a network and all do the same kind of good work. The Innocence Project in New York is sort of the hub. We litigate from coast to coast and we take a lot of cases, but we handle only DNA cases.

Believe it or not, Talmage, the DNA cases are the easiest cases. None of them is easy. It's very difficult to get somebody out of prison, even with DNA testing. There are a lot of non-DNA cases out there that are basically hopeless because you don't have clear biological proof to get somebody out. So we take only DNA cases and that keeps us busy full-time. We have a staff of 100 and a budget of 20 million that we have to raise privately. But we're extremely aggressive. That's what we do, primarily, is get innocent people out of prison.

What we also do is legislate, push policy, push corrections, and try to pass laws in all 50 states that will prevent wrongful convictions. It's something we could do. We could stop almost all wrongful convictions, almost all, if we would change some of our laws. And we advocate for that. We push policy hard and we have professionals who do that and it's a kick-ass organization and most of the boards in New York have some really high-powered people. It's the kind of board nobody wants to get off of. I've been on it for 12 years. I think my time is up, and I'm not sure what's going to happen. I don't want to get off the board, but that's how meaningful the work is.

Talmage Boston: A big part of our audience for this symposium are law school deans, former deans, and law school professors and they're all going to go back to their law schools. You talked about how Innocence Project is underfunded and can always use more help. What's your message to them to take back to their students about opportunities to do some meaningful pro bono work for the Innocence Project?

John Grisham: We helped start the Innocence Project at Ole Miss and helped start the one here at UVA and both have been very successful. If you get it into a clinical situation where you have students working the cases, they love it. We have far too many kids who want to get in the program because they love the work.

Just a quick anecdote, my son, Ty, ten years ago was a law student at Ole Miss and was in the Innocence Clinic there. He was assigned a case on death row to a guy named Eddie Lee Howard. Ty went to visit Eddie Lee Howard a couple times on death row at Parchman Prison in Mississippi, got to know him pretty well, and that was in 2008. Last week, the Supreme Court finally,

after 20 years of litigation, awarded Eddie Lee Howard a new trial based on lack of evidence. He was convicted by some really unreliable bite mark evidence which has been proven unreliable everywhere. There's still a bunch of it in Mississippi for a bunch of reasons. But Eddie Lee Howard got a new trial last week. That is a huge victory for the Innocence Project and my son had a very small role in it a long time ago and we had a reason to celebrate last week because of that one case.

But the students love it. Students and young lawyers often ask me what they could do if they're concerned about innocence. Once you get into this stuff, meet these exonerees, and read about their cases, you really want to get involved at some level. I tell students or young lawyers, find the Innocence Project. There's one nearby. Volunteer, or at least find a client in prison who claims to be innocent and write the guy a letter. Start a correspondence. You don't know what it's like to be in prison with nobody on the outside who believes in you. You don't know what it's like to be there if nobody will listen to you or write you a letter.

And to get a letter from a lawyer, just a friendly 'hello' letter, means the world to these prisoners. I've talked to these exonerees and listened to their stories and they'll tell you they were lost, they were in prison, things were hopeless, and they were innocent. Prison is terrible enough if you're guilty, but if you're innocent, it's ten times worse. They light up when they get a letter from the lawyer. It shows the power of a law degree, the power of the license to practice law, what you can do, what you can change if you really want to.

Talmage Boston: When you came to Texas last October and spoke here for the Dallas Museum of Art and then you went down to Austin for the Texas Book Festival, I know between those two events, you flew down to Beaumont?

John Grisham: Yes.

Talmage Boston: And is that guy you visited still on death row?

John Grisham: No, Joe Bryan is a famous Texas case. Joe served 35 years for somebody else's murder. It was the murder of his wife, a woman he adored. It's a terrible factual situation, and he's now almost 80 years old. He was turned down for parole seven times in Texas, but he was awarded parole back in February and got out just in time for COVID. But he had a very good landing place. He has family in Houston where he is now and he's doing great. I talk to him all the time. One of the happy stories was when Joe Bryan got out in February.

Talmage Boston: Besides the Innocence Project, another cause for which you're a leading advocate, and have spoken at national conventions, and you spoke at our

big Texas Access to Justice dinner last October, is the need for legal aid and access to justice for people who can't afford lawyers. What was it about that cause that made you want to get involved and be such an advocate for it.

John Grisham:

Well, Talmage, when I was a young lawyer, I went back to my hometown and just hung out my shingle and had a law office and declared myself ready to sue. I was the new gunslinger in town with no ammunition, but I was raring to go. All my clients were poor people or working people or folks I'd grown up with and they couldn't pay hourly fees. So I took a lot of cases. I always found it impossible to say "No" to somebody who needed legal help. A lot of folks don't need it, although they think they do. But when you're dealing with somebody with a real claim -- be it addiction or a woman in an abusive situation in a home where it's so, so terrible -- whatever it was, I couldn't ever say "Nno".

So, I took a lot of stuff pro bono and that was my specialty right off the bat. It didn't start off that way, but most of my clients just never paid me. So, I got a good taste of it right off the bat and I realized also, as a very young lawyer, the power of a law license because when you have a client who is poor and has no voice, no standing, no respect, nothing, and they're about to be wrongfully evicted or some used car dealer is pulling a fast one on them, they come to see you. You do your research, and you realize that they're right, and the bad guy's wrong, and I love to do this. You make that phone call, you call the crook. You say, "Hey, I'm so-and-so attorney-at-law. My client is right here. What are you doing?"

And everything changes dramatically. I mean everything changes and suddenly, your client has a voice. Your client has rights that can be protected and I just loved that kind of work, even when I was starving to death. It was something I found very enjoyable and so, once I was able to do it and got on my feet, I gave a lot back to legal aid and tried to help poor people get access to justice. You guys at this conference have talked about it all week. I don't know what the true national average is, but it's something like 50 percent of all Americans do not have access to civil justice and we're about to see a whole new wave of people who are going to be mistreated because of the addictions and lack of healthcare and all sorts of things that are happening now because of the pandemic.

Talmage Boston:

One of your recent novels, *Gray Mountain*, is the story of a woman who's a young lawyer at a large New York law firm and she's miserable, and working all the time. Then, there's a layoff and she decides to go to a legal aid clinic where, all of a sudden, she finds herself in the middle of fascinating work that ultimately, of course, per the plots in all your novels, turns dangerous.

Again with our audience of law school deans and professors, in terms of the level of engaging work that can make a difference in people's lives, and doing that type of work compared to the type of work done at big firms, I would think a case should be made to law students to think about it at the early part of one's career. It's not just about money; there's a whole lot more to be gained by that type of experience.

John Grisham:

Yes, I never had the opportunity to work for a big firm and I never really wanted to. Unlike Mitch in *The Firm*, I was not heavily recruited out of law school, so I didn't even apply. I knew I was going back to my hometown to start my own shop. Over the years, I've come to respect big firms who are very serious about legal aid and pro bono work. Now that I'm involved with so many death penalty cases and so many people on death row, I know that the work some of these big firms do with death penalty litigation and wrongful convictions eats up thousands of hours. Some of these wrongful conviction cases drag on for ten years. These big firms have the resources, and they also have the power, enthusiasm, and desire to represent people who need help and can't pay. I have a lot of respect for the big firms who do that.

I think almost all lawyers believe that you've got to give something back. You've got to make a living, first of all, and I never was very good at that, but as a lawyer, you've got to give something back. Ten percent of your time has got to be spent helping people who can't help themselves. That's what I try to tell people and sometimes it comes across in the novels.

In the financial crisis of 2008, several big law firms, amidst all these layoffs, told their associates, "We're not going to pay you for 18 months. You've got to leave. We'll keep your health insurance, but go work for a non-profit or pro bono legal service somewhere. Keep working, we'll keep you employed. You'll have a place here when things come back to normal." And these young lawyers scattered. Suddenly, legal aid societies were getting bombarded by lawyers with Ivy League degrees who wanted to do pro bono work in the trenches to get their hands dirty. I thought that was a really neat factual backdrop to take a young lawyer who suddenly is kicked out of her job and has to go into Appalachia in the coal country and work in a legal aid clinic, and that became the story of *Gray Mountain* and it turned out okay.

Talmage Boston:

I'd say so. Going back to your writing, besides creating legal thrillers for adult readers, ten years ago, you started writing thrillers for children and adolescents in books that feature Theo Boone, kid lawyer. It's a series like the Hardy Boys or Nancy Drew mysteries that you and I grew up with. What made you think you might want to write fiction for a younger audience?

John Grisham:

I had never thought about it. I was having too much fun with, as we call them, the big books, the big novels. About ten years ago, my daughter started teaching in the public schools in Raleigh, North Carolina, after she graduated from UNC. Her first class was a group of fifth graders and she really pushed reading. My wife and I bought the whole Hardy Boys library series and we stocked her school's library for her. It was a thrill to do it. We also helped her set up her classroom and she was all excited about her first year of teaching.

Not long after she started, over dinner one night, she asked me the question, "Could I write suspense for kids?" I never thought about it before. She said she was having trouble finding good suspense for kids. There were lots of other types of books -- history, fiction, fantasy, whatever. And I thought, "Well, that's a challenge." And I started thinking about how I would do it. I came up with the notion of this 13-year-old kid named Theo Boone who's an only child, and both of his parents are lawyers in a small town, and they practice together, and the family is just devoted to the law. All they talk about is the law, such that the boy is hearing about nothing but the law. And he knows a lot of it. He's a real operator around town. He knows every cop, every judge, every lawyer. He hangs out in the courtroom. For Theo, fun is watching a trial, not watching a ballgame or playing video games. He goes to trials and because of that, he knows a lot of the law and he stays in trouble because he's always giving legal advice to his friends and their older brothers and it's part of the plots.

Writing the books has been a lot of fun and the kids, so far, have enjoyed them. In every book, I try to teach kids something about the law. The last book in the Boone series was about the cash bail system in this country and how it keeps people locked up who should be out for minor crimes. I always pick an issue and try to tell both sides of it, and tell them a lot about the procedures, vocabulary, nomenclature, ins and outs of the law, and what happens on the criminal side and sometimes the civil side.

I get lots of letters from teachers who make every kid in their class write me a letter. So, I get a stack of letters and they're hilarious. I got a letter from a federal judge in California a few years back who wrote me a very nice formal letter. He'd had a class come to his courtroom on a field trip to watch a trial. During recess, he invited the kids back to his chambers for conversation. The kids were peppering him with good questions about procedure and the law, so he asked the teacher, "You are really teaching these kids well about the law. How are you doing it?" The teacher said, "We're reading Theodore Boone."

His letter to me was very complimentary, and he said, "Keep it up. You're doing a good job." Stuff like that keeps me going, but after seven Theo

books, I'm beginning to wonder how long I can sustain a long series. I'm two years between those books now.

Talmage Boston: For those participating in this program who have not read a Theo Boone book yet, even though they're targeted for children and adolescents, I've read every one of them and they're fantastic. The plots are terrific, and you'll see how John weaves in education about courts and justice into the plots and it's just terrific.

John, a final area where you and especially your wife, Renee, have taken on real leadership roles is attempting to address the wide-spread problem of hunger among children in America. That's especially a problem now in the pandemic. We've got on the screen a slide from this wonderful organization, No Kid Hungry, that you and Renee are big leaders in. What is it about this problem that caused you and your wife to decide you wanted to become leaders in addressing it?

John Grisham: It's funny how things go back to your kids. When my daughter started teaching, within a few days, she called home one night in tears. She was really upset because she realized that some of her kids were coming to school without breakfast and they were hungry. And sometimes the bus would get there late and they couldn't run by the cafeteria. Some didn't want to be stigmatized by going by for a free breakfast, and some didn't want to be stigmatized by getting a free or reduced price lunch. And she said to us, "I've got hungry kids in my classroom and I can't teach them when they're hungry." We were stunned. We had never seen the numbers. We had never stopped to think about childhood hunger in America and probably most of us have not.

So my wife plunged in with both feet and we were buying breakfast packs and everything else for the school, and that led to my wife's involvement with No Kid Hungry. She's now on the board. No Kid Hungry is a national effort in all 50 states to raise a bunch of money to help every school district make sure that kids get food. And it's a problem that's solvable because there's enough food in this country, enough money in this country, and enough appropriations and food bills every year for the last 50 years to provide enough food. There has been a disconnect between the appropriations of federal help at the state level and getting the food on the table with the kids because of bureaucracies and summertimes and weekends and now COVID, when the kids are not in school.

So No Kid Hungry works with local school districts to show them how to get the food, and we buy equipment if it's needed, and we'll even buy food, but we are working right now to set a crisis point because of COVID and kids not being in school, and they're not getting their food. Right here in Virginia, we were the first state to be fully funded under No Kid Hungry

because of our ex-governor's wife and my wife. They spearheaded the effort to make Virginia 100 percent funded. We've got that now and so, in this county right here where we live, Charlottesville, our school buses are delivering lunches to kids at home. But they're still not getting all of them, so it's a huge problem right now. And Renee and I are working a lot of hours to try to help that.

Talmage Boston: I think part of this conference is to get people to think outside the box in terms of ways lawyers can be leaders. In the conference materials, they're going to send a donation link for No Kid Hungry, and if you'd like a nice way of saying thanks to John for participating in the conference, we'd love it if you'd make a donation to No Kid Hungry because obviously, the need is great.

John, let's talk now kind of about the conference theme of lawyers as leaders. You've had a unique life story of going from doing something that didn't really seem to be taking you very far, like your original legal career and legislative career, and then, lo and behold, next thing you know, you start writing fiction and all kinds of good things happen. I think the way it all happened could be instructive to our audience as to just go where your heart's telling you to go. Tell the story of the circumstances that caused you to write your first novel, *A Time to Kill*.

John Grisham: If I had not been a lawyer, I would never have written the first book. I didn't study writing. I didn't dream of being a writer. It was not something I ever thought I would do. I was 30 years old before I started writing my first book *A Time to Kill*.

Because I wanted to be in the courtroom, I volunteered for a lot of court-appointed cases and had a lot of clients like that, because I was always trying to be in the courtroom. When I was in law school, Talmage, I would watch the federal court docket in Oxford. If I saw a big trial coming with well-known lawyers, I would cut class and go watch the trial. And even when I was practicing, if I knew there was a really good trial going on somewhere or in my courthouse, I tried to be there just to watch the good trial lawyers and I had this really strong desire to be a courtroom lawyer. We had some really great ones back then in Mississippi. Like Texas, we had great tort laws. They were favorable to the plaintiff and so, we had a really strong trial lawyers' bar. I was a member of it and I wanted to spend time there and learn.

I was hanging around the courtroom in my home county one day watching a horrible criminal trial and it inspired me to create this drama. I didn't know it was going to be a book. I don't remember what it was going to be, but it was a very emotional case of a young girl who'd been sexually assaulted and the facts were beyond description. The situation was so emotional that

the judge, who was my mentor, and he was a cranky old trial judge, ordered the courtroom to be closed, and he got everybody out of the courtroom except the jurors, of course, and the lawyers and clerks. I was an officer of the court so I could stay. But he banned the spectators, ran them all out, put deputies at the door, and he cleared the courtroom. I'd never seen that before or since.

So, this little girl then testified and it went on for an hour or so. She took us through every emotion known to the human soul. Love, hate, revenge -- it was incredible. There were times when I looked at the jury box and they were all crying. I knew two ladies on the jury and even the judge was hiding his face. It was just God-awful. After an hour, she'd had enough and so the judge said, "Okay, let's take a break." I fled the courtroom. I couldn't wait to get out of it.

It stuck with me for a long time. I began to think about, "What would that jury do if the facts were a little different? And what would her father do if he managed to get his revenge?" So this drama came together mentally and I became obsessed with it. After a few weeks of that, I said, "Okay, I'm going to try to see if I can capture this in words." And late one night after Renee had put the kids to bed, I took a legal pad and wrote "Chapter One." Didn't have a title back then, didn't know what I was doing, didn't know how far I would get, didn't know if I was going to finish it, didn't care. I just wanted to see if I could capture this before I forgot about it. Then I became fairly disciplined about writing, and started writing every day.

I tell students and aspiring writers that until you're writing every day, nothing's going to happen. You can talk about it, think about it, whatever you want to do. Don't talk about your book, just write it. Write one page a day, every day, no excuses, same place, same time. Write a page a day and until you're doing that, nothing's going to happen. I learned that lesson the hard way.

After three years, the book was finished. I didn't know what to do with it. It was a thousand page manuscript and I began sending it off to New York to agents and publishers. This was in 1987, and they sent it right back. It was the classical submission, rejection, submission, rejection. The rejections piled up. Finally, an agent called me one day and said, "I'd like to represent you and this book." And that was the first of many magical phone calls from New York and the book came out about a year later. By then, it was called *A Time to Kill*.

The publisher who bought the book was very small, unknown, and I was unknown. They printed 5,000 hardback copies and we couldn't give them away. It was pretty much a flop. My home paper, *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*, the paper I grew up with, took great delight in trashing the book. I

almost cried. I was hurt so bad when my own paper really trashed the book. I went to bookstores to sell and sign the book and nobody showed up. I did everything you do as a debut author. It's part of the process, I guess. We can all tell those stories, especially now when they're funny, but they weren't funny back then.

After writing for three years, I was in the habit of doing it and I had the desire. I was suddenly consumed with this dream of writing full-time. Wouldn't it be great to leave the law behind, leave all these clients who can't pay, all the 50 phone calls a day, the constant struggle to meet the overhead, all this kind of stuff. Wouldn't it be great to walk away from that and do nothing but write? That was the dream I had the last several years that I practiced law and so I told Renee, "I've got another idea for a book and I think it's more commercially accessible, I think it has a chance to be more popular. I'm going to write one more book and if the second book doesn't work, I'm going to quit this little secret hobby."

And the second book was *The Firm*. And when it came out in March of '91, it was very popular and I could quit the law office. I woke up one morning and said, "I'm bored with politics, I'm bored with the law, I'm going to be a full-time writer." And that was almost 30 years ago.

Talmage Boston: I remember you telling the story about how your agent had *The Firm* and was trying to sell it and you went to church one Sunday. Tell us how your life changed that day.

John Grisham: It changed one cold dreary Sunday morning, the first Sunday in January 1990. We lived about two blocks from the church and it took two cars to get us there with two kids. So, I got mad and went on early and that's when this happened. When my wife came to church, she said, "Jay Garrin just called." Jay was my agent. He had just called from New York on a Sunday morning. These people don't work on weekends and they don't work in summertime. They don't work much. I said, "What's he doing on Sunday?" She said, "Go call him right now. Something big is going to happen."

The Firm had been in his office for about three months with nothing happening. He'd shown it to a couple of publishers and there'd been no reception. What we didn't know though, and this used to happen in publishing all the time, a bootleg copy of the manuscript had surfaced in Hollywood. Someone had copied it in New York and paid a buck or two and got it to Hollywood. The guy got it out there and ran 20 copies, and sent the thing off to all the big studios. And he got nervous when they all started wanting to buy it.

So he called my agent and they had a big fight, and they said, "Okay, let's call a truce here. This could be something big." And at the last moment,

somebody said, "Perhaps we should call the author." And they did! I got home from church and called my agent and he said, "Yeah, we're about to have the final round of bidding for *The Firm* for film rights." I asked, "What about the book? We haven't sold the book rights. We've sold nothing." He said, "I can't talk to you right now. We're in a hurry. They're going to start bidding and I need your authority to take the highest offer from Paramount, Universal Pictures, and Disney Touchstone for the film rights to *The Firm*." And I said, "Okay. Go do it."

I went back to church in tow with Renee, and we were stunned, obviously. And we raced home after the longest sermon in the world. It was one of those Baptist services that just go on forever. You've got special music and, my favorite, the baby dedication service. I wanted to sneak out the back door and go home. But we suffered through, got home, and the phone was literally ringing. It was my agent, and he said, "We just sold the film rights to *The Firm* to Paramount Pictures." And I said, "You got to be kidding me." That was the big phone call that changed it all. Suddenly, there was a movie deal, and within two weeks we had a book deal. We kept all the foreign rights. That was the smartest I ever did. We kept all the foreign rights ourselves and sold those off, language by language, and the book just kind of marched around the world. It was a phone call every other week, another deal. And at that point, I could walk out of my law office and never look back.

Talmage Boston: That's what you did!

John Grisham: That happened!

Talmage Boston: John, you're a little younger than I am, but when we went to law school, none of the law professors or classes were talking about leadership or the fact that lawyers -- because of our capacity to communicate, organize, argue, persuade, and do all the things we do -- have a lot of potential to be leaders. So, this conference has a lot of law schools who either have implemented or are thinking about implementing leadership programs into their curriculums. Back in our law school days, do you think something like that would've been helpful to you?

John Grisham: Back in our day it was unheard of. I never heard the word 'leadership' used in law school, not that it was a bad thing. As it turned out, looking back, in all the places I've lived, the leaders were usually lawyers, especially in politics. I mentioned the State House that I was in, but I've lived in three or four small towns in the last forty years and the leaders were almost always the lawyers. I think leadership training is a wonderful idea for a law school because it's a natural. Lawyers know how to organize, communicate, they have a real feel for the problems of a community because they see them first-hand through their clients. I'm sure it would be great if every

professional school emphasized leadership, and that lawyers are going to be the leaders. I think it's a wonderful to teach or inspire students to be aware of it. Lawyers are always going to be leaders.

Talmage Boston: These days, you particularly see a lot of lawyers who become the heads of universities, and commissioners of major sports leagues, because the tools in the lawyers' toolkit seem to lead people into different area of leadership and certainly that's been true of the different ways that you've used your gifts to become a leader.

Let's move to the present and the future. Your next legal thriller is coming out next month on October 13th, and it's titled *A Time for Mercy*. Would you give this audience a sneak preview of it?

John Grisham: Sure, I'd love to. It's a sequel to *A Time to Kill*, which was published in '89, and I went 24 years before bringing back Jake Brigance and his cast of characters in the small town of Clanton, Mississippi. *A Time to Kill* was very autobiographical. I told you the story because when I wrote that book, I was living that life in that small town in Mississippi, I knew the clients, the characters, the judge, I knew them all. That's where I'd prefer to do all my writing. That's where I'm from, and where I belong. For a long time, I kept waiting for the next story there. In 2013, I published a book called *Sycamore Row* which had Jake back in Clanton with a civil trial, not a criminal trial. When that book was published, it did very well -- much better than the other books -- and we realized that there are a lot of people who like Jake and like the characters, and like those stories. So, after *Sycamore Row* in 2013, I began thinking of the next story in Clanton.

Talmage, I can't write a book until I have a story. I told you 20 years ago, I'd love to write a baseball novel. I'd written two football books, I love sports, and I wanted to write a really good baseball novel. But I didn't have the story. I kept waiting and waiting and waiting for the story and finally, I was inspired by one of your heroes, Tony Conigliaro from the Red Sox, and the famous beanball and what happened to him after that. And so, that book became *Calico Joe*, but it took me 20 years to get the story.

So, with Jake in Clanton, I'd love to do a big courtroom drama every other year, but in reality, in a small town in Mississippi, no lawyer is going to have that many big cases, so I can't use him all the time. But a couple years ago, inspired by a true story, and I'm almost always inspired by a true story, the idea came together, and I got really excited about it. So I started writing in January. I always start in January of each year and try to finish by July the 1st. And I was making a lot of progress. January, February, and March are great times to write because there's not much going on, but college basketball, which we really enjoy, but it's just a good time to write.

And then COVID hit. And COVID kept me at home. It's still got me at home. I couldn't get out much, still can't. So the book got thicker and thicker and thicker. I think it's the longest book I've written. I think it has more words than all the other books. But there's a lot to the story and Jake is forced by his judge, Judge Noose, to take a very unpopular case of the defense of a 16-year-old kid charged with the fatal killing of a deputy sheriff. There's a dead cop in a small town and Jake wants no part of it and nobody else does either. And the judge got him involved quickly just to make sure the kid's rights were protected because sentiment was really hot against the kid and Jake had every intention of getting rid of the case. But the judge can't find another lawyer in the area to take the case and, of course, you know up front that Jake's going to take the case and get stuck with it. So, once he embraces his client's defense, there's no looking back.

But in doing so, he realizes that his hometown has really turned against him, because he's taken a very unpopular case, which happens. And so, that's the set up for *A Time for Mercy*.

Talmage Boston: I can't imagine anybody hearing that description and not pre-ordering the book on Amazon today, and I've had the privilege of reading an advance copy. I encourage everybody that, despite its length, and it's not that long, but it's a fantastic novel and I know you'll enjoy it.

John Grisham: Talmage, you're being a bit modest here. You did not read the galley. I sent you the pre-book and I said, "Proofread this, okay?" Because I value your insight and I value your ability to tell stories and spot flaws and you were very good as an editor. I didn't know you could be an editor, but you were very good.

Talmage Boston: I'm now going to turn it over now to Leah. We're about at the end of the hour. John, as always, it's been a fun conversation and I think our audience has learned about a lot of different ways that lawyers can lead with their lawyer skills, even when they're not practicing law. So, thanks for being a part of this conference.

John Grisham: My pleasure, I enjoyed it. That was good.

Leah Teague: Thank you so much to both of you. We are just so honored that you took time out of your very busy schedules to be with us and what just an incredible way for us to end what's been a fabulous, fabulous conference. We can't thank you enough.