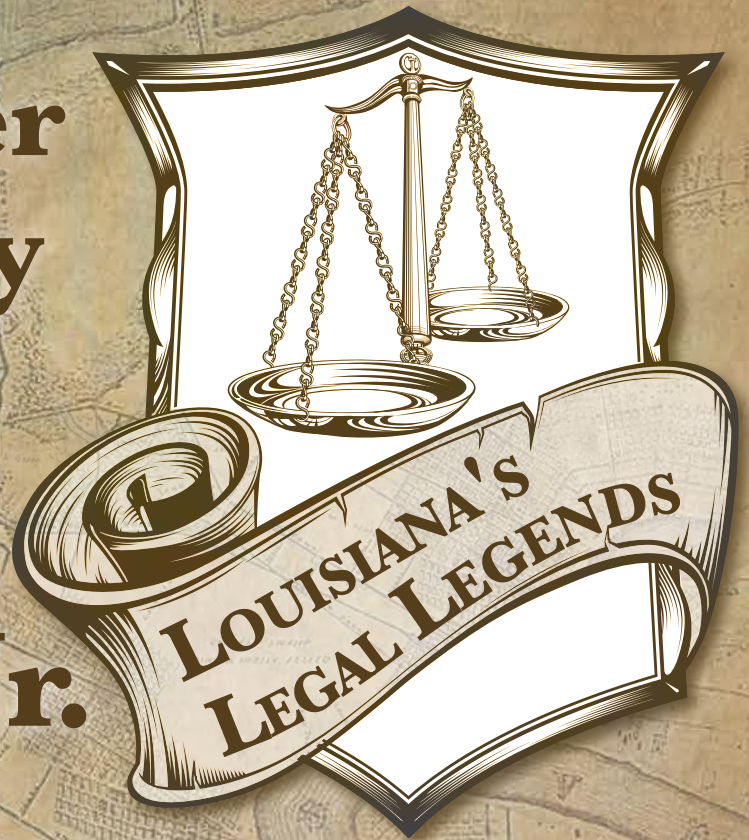


Life, Career and Legacy of William J. Guste, Jr.



By Anne D. Guste



William J. Guste, Jr. Photo provided by the Guste Family.

Louisiana's legal legacy is deep-rooted in every corner of the state. Inspired by the New Orleans' Tricentennial, the Louisiana Bar Journal began a series to commemorate and recognize the state's legal legends, including "legends in their own time." For this issue, New Orleans attorney Anne D. Guste recaps the life, career and legacy of her father, William J. Guste, Jr.

The Beginning

My father's political career had, perhaps, an unusual start at the front end. Waking up one morning, assembling the younger handful of his nine children with my mother off on their way for another school day, and getting ready to head off to work as an attorney in a private law practice, my father received a phone call from the sister of the incumbent in an ongoing election for the State Senate in our district in New Orleans.

Upon the unexpected passing during the night of her brother, who had often consulted with my father over lunch during his tenure as a well-liked Senator, she tells my father she wanted to suggest and urge that he run for the Senate seat in her brother's place considering the respect and admiration that her brother had for him during his life. Somewhat taken aback, my father tells her he will give it some thought and consideration and will get back in touch with her.

His day at work began, and phone calls then ensued to professional colleagues, family and friends asking for their own thoughts, suggestions and opinions as to the possibility of a run for a public office. Candidly being advised by some that he would need the help of a myriad of folks to pull off such a run, such as a campaign manager, campaign consultants, an accountant, fund raisers, drivers and the like, my father confidently reassured them he had all of the help he needed for those tasks — in his wife, our mother! Others more simply just encouraged him and offered their support.

So, by the end of that business day, my mother received a phone call from him letting her know that he was over at Loyola (where the local qualifying for elections was done at that time) and that he had qualified for the race. The opening of his official public statement would, therefore, read that “at the urging of close friends of George Tessier and mine, I have decided to run for State Senator. . . .”

Shortly thereafter, a map of the district was prominently hung over the fireplace in the living area of our house and our mother was soon out walking the streets of the district door-to-door talking to the residents and urging them to vote for her husband. We had just about six weeks to get the job done, and there were 11 candidates in the race!

But, to be sure, by the time my father had entered this race, he had already had a fairly strong foothold in the community, having played a significant and influential role in a variety of community and public service endeavors. As one of the founding members of the Metropolitan Crime Commission in New Orleans, he had served as its secretary and later as its president during its earliest of years. He



Mr. and Mrs. William J. Guste, Jr. and their children in early campaign materials. *Photo provided by the Guste Family.*

had served as counsel for the Housing Authority of New Orleans for 20 years and as the chair and a board member of the National Housing Conference. In this latter role, he was able to secure the necessary funding by way of a significant loan for the Archdiocese of New Orleans to build its first home for the elderly, the Monsignor Wynhoven Apartments, on the west bank; he then served as the first president of this non-profit organization. Other homes for the elderly, including the Chateau de Notre Dame, would soon follow.

Also, during the mid-1960s, my father helped draft the charter by which the administration of Xavier University was turned over from the religious order of sisters that owned the university to a lay board of trustees. Upon this reorganization, he then served as the chair of its first board of directors and for many years following as a board member.

Also by this time, my father had served for two years as the state deputy of the Knights of Columbus, as president of the Young Men's Business Club in New Orleans, as president of Associated Catholic Charities, as chair of the Council of Civic Club Presidents, and as one of the original organizers and first secretary of the United Fund. Addressing public health issues, he had also served on the board of Charity Hospital, as president of the Cancer Association of Greater New Orleans and

as a two-term national president of the United Cancer Council.

Running a determined and effective race for the Senate seat, therefore, our father was the front runner and was elected, serving from 1968 to 1972.

Our lives, as to the younger of his children at this point, were particularly colorful and inspired by our father's new role in the State Legislature. We did, indeed, get the biggest of thrills by running through the halls of the Jack Tar Hotel in Baton Rouge (now the Hilton Baton Rouge Capitol Center), checking into the hotel coffee shop for grilled cheese and club sandwiches, ordering a late-night hot fudge sundae from room service and taking many a dive into the hotel swimming pool. Our presence at the State Capitol was also equally well known, running up and down the elevators in the building, enjoying the rooftop view, climbing the steps to the balcony seating area in the Senate chamber, and other generalized romping and roaming about through the building.

At this time, our ages, as his children, ranged from about age 20, as to my oldest brother, William Guste III, an attorney in private practice now for about 45 years, on to about age 7, as to myself, the youngest. The 10th child in our family, a Down's Syndrome baby at birth, had passed away unexpectedly approximately two years earlier at the age of 2.



Mr. and Mrs. William J. Guste, Jr. and their family at the celebration of their 50th wedding anniversary at St. Patrick's Church in New Orleans in April 1997. Photo provided by the Guste Family.

Moving On

Somewhere about mid-stream into his four-year term as a State Senator, our father jumped into the 1970 mayor's race in New Orleans. It was a crowded field of many colorful candidates, and our father fell short of the runoff after the first primary, placing a strong third in the race behind Moon Landrieu and Jimmy Fitzmorris.

Not too long thereafter, and upon the advice of and after consultation with a tight and experienced group of political consultants and strategists who almost weekly sat around the dinner table at our house, my father's political focus would change from a local perspective to a state-wide one. There, he would find success in getting elected, initially in 1972, as the State Attorney General. He would then go on to serve five consecutive terms in this office. He did not choose, for his own personal reasons, primarily health concerns relating to both his hip and his heart, to proceed with any election for either Governor or the U.S. Senate, although it

had been proposed and suggested to him that he pursue these offices. My mother has not neglected to tell me, however, of an incident at a local political function whereby she was summoned over to talk to a small group of gentlemen who did not hesitate to tell her that my father would have to "learn how to lie a little" in order to get elected to the top gubernatorial spot. She reared back and informed them that they would have to tell that to my father themselves and drew back from the conversation.

Getting There

As a State Senator from 1968-72, some of my father's primary activities, accomplishments and achievements were:

- ▶ organizing the Louisiana Housing Council;
- ▶ authoring Louisiana's Turnkey Housing Law which provided low-cost housing for residents who qualified for FHA or VA housing;
- ▶ authoring urban renewal enabling

legislation for the City of New Orleans;

- ▶ chairing the Ad Hoc Committee of New Orleans which prepared and secured approval of the City's Model City Planning Grant;

- ▶ co-authoring legislation to secure a projected \$35 million for streets in New Orleans;

- ▶ co-authoring legislation to require the Department of Highways to file long-range planning projections with the Legislature;

- ▶ working for legislation that brought the Department of Highways under legislative budget control;

- ▶ co-authoring the Coordinating Council for Higher Education Bill;

- ▶ supporting the adoption of a progressive program for the management of state debt;

- ▶ authoring laws to protect citizens' deposits in securities and financial institutions;

- ▶ establishing a special commission to investigate organized crime in Louisiana; and



Louisiana Attorney General William J. Guste, Jr., far right, greeted Pope John Paul II during the Pope's visit to New Orleans in 1987. Photo provided by the Guste Family.

- ▶ serving on the Advisory Committee for the Governor's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice.

As the State Attorney General, some of his major achievements in office were:

- ▶ The Tidelands case whereby \$140 million in oil revenues due to the State of Louisiana by the federal government were recovered, *U.S. v. Louisiana*.

- ▶ The impounding of federal highway funds, forcing the federal government to release \$2 billion in transportation funds appropriated by Congress for state highway development. Filing the lead class action suit for Louisiana and all states, the state Attorney General's Office recovered \$204 million for Louisiana's roads and highways as a result of this lawsuit. See, *Louisiana v. Brinegar*.

- ▶ The release of "8G" funds, by negotiating a settlement with the federal government that resulted in the release of \$654 million plus in oil and gas revenues.

- ▶ Securing the recovery of \$100 million in oil overcharges in a lawsuit against Exxon.

- ▶ Drafting Louisiana's Consumer Protection Law with New Orleans attorney Patrick Breeden.

- ▶ Blocking a \$260 million annual increase in workers' compensation rates in proceedings before the State Insurance Commissioner.

- ▶ Recovering \$100 million plus in unpaid royalties in a lawsuit against Texaco.

- ▶ Working against the destruction of Louisiana's estuaries, opposing shell dredging.

- ▶ Opposing and preventing the disposal of superfund waste in Louisiana.

- ▶ Serving as president of the National Association of Attorneys General and receiving its Wyman Memorial Award as the AG "who has done the most to advance the objectives of the National Association."

Outside of his career in public service, my father served as the chair of the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation and as one of the organizers and advocacy members of the board of directors of UNITY for the Homeless in New Orleans upon the request of then-Archbishop of New Orleans Philip M. Hannan.

My father was recognized by Loyola University as a Doctor of Laws Honoris Causa and received Spring Hill College's Gautrelet Award "in recognition of his outstanding leadership on behalf of his religious heritage, his continuing dedication to the service of other men and for his singular contributions in the field of public service." He also received an Honorary Doctor of Letters from Notre Dame Seminary and the Torch of Liberty Award from the Anti-Defamation League.

When I think of my father's life and service, as a person "for others" in the Jesuit

tradition of his high school, college and law school, I often also think of a particular scene in the movie, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As the lawyer packs his briefcase and exits the emptied courtroom alone after losing a hopeless case defending a black man charged with a criminal offense before an all-white jury in the racially segregated South, the elderly town Reverend, who is seated, presumably with members of his congregation, in the rear balcony of the courtroom with the lawyer's two children, leans over to one of the children and says, "Stand up. Your father is passing."

I guess those words alone are enough to express and to convey my own experience of appreciation, gratitude and respect for my father's life and work.

Anne D. Guste, the daughter and ninth child of Mr. and Mrs. William J. Guste, Jr., is an attorney in private practice handling general practice matters in the Greater New Orleans area. She received a BA degree in 1982 from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and her JD degree in 1989 from Loyola University Law School. She is a member of the Louisiana State Bar Association's Solo and Small Firms Section and the Alternative Dispute Resolution Section. She received certification in civil (commercial and employment) mediation training and is a former member of the Louisiana Association for Justice. (anneguste@yahoo.com; 3030 Nashville Ave., New Orleans, LA 70125)



William J. Guste, Jr. with friends on a fishing trip. Guste received several awards during his career for his environmental and conservationist work. Photo provided by the Guste Family.