



Robert Kelly Pace

Brian Rollings
& Jeff Wood

Let us be grateful to people who make us happy. They are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom.

—Marcel Proust

Robert “Kelly” Pace was born in 1949 in New Orleans, Louisiana, to William and June Pace. His father was an admiral in the Navy, and they lived in numerous places around the country until they settled in Virginia Beach. He fell in love with the water and aspired to follow in his father’s footsteps. Kelly joined the Naval Academy and, on the recommendation of an admiral, applied to SMU School of Law in 1971.

Upon acceptance, Kelly drove his motorcycle from Virginia to Texas and arrived on campus the day before classes started. Kelly’s only possessions were his motorcycle, cash, and a backpack with a few days’ worth of clothes. Frederick Shelton attended law school with Kelly and remembers when he arrived on campus: “He didn’t have a place to stay, so he slept in a nearby campus park for the first week of class before finally finding a place to rent. He was definitely a free spirit.”

In 1975, Kelly graduated from SMU and remained in Dallas County, where he began practicing in civil rights law. Five years later, he began solely practicing criminal law. Although indeed free-spirited, Kelly had an impeccable work ethic and was a stickler for detail. Fred Shelton (who after law school had become the County Attorney for Hunt County) recalled

the moment he realized that Kelly was no ordinary attorney. According to Fred, Kelly represented a client charged with a misdemeanor telephone harassment case. Fred offered Kelly the standard six-month deferred deal, assuming Kelly would take it without a question.

But instead of accepting the offer, Kelly drove out to Hunt County and to the local Southwestern Bell office. There, he pulled all the telephone records belonging to his client and copied them. With the records in hand, Kelly marched into Fred’s office and said, “Look, there’s no record of my guy ever calling your complaining witness.”

Fred was impressed and dismissed the case and recalls thinking that no other attorney would have ever put that much effort into a misdemeanor case. But that was Kelly. He never left stones unturned.

Kelly would go on to build an impeccable reputation throughout North Texas. Although he handled every type of criminal-law case, his forte was drug cases. He had a keen sense of the Fourth Amendment and never overlooked a minor detail regarding the search and seizure involving one of his clients. For years he represented defendants accused of high-profile drug cases, and on more than several occasions would find a



flaw within the search warrant or detention that would cause the government's case to crumble. Kelly would become known as a search-and-seizure expert throughout Texas.

Although things seemed perfect with Kelly, secretly he faced his own demons. For years, Kelly battled addiction. Eventually, he hit rock bottom. The only way out was a strong determination to change his life for the better and rehab.

Kelly recalled a time while en route to law school when he detoured and traveled through the backroads of East Texas. He fell in love with the tall pines and lush green landscape. As luck would have it, there was a rehab facility in Overton, Texas, sitting within the heart of East Texas. After completing rehab, Kelly moved his family to Whitehouse, rented a small office in Tyler, and started over.

Soon after opening his new law office, Kelly hired a young woman named Diana Martinez as his paralegal. She spoke Spanish, as Kelly quickly realized that advertising in the Hispanic community would reach a clientele base that many attorneys were not focused on at that time. The flood of clients came in almost overnight.

Kelly also knew that he needed to prove himself in East Texas courtrooms. Two cases in particular set Kelly on the

path of becoming one of the most respected criminal defense attorneys in the region. One was a murder case out of Cherokee County and the other a murder case out of Smith County. The result was the same in both—the two-word verdict, “not guilty.” Kelly was electric in the courtroom, full of charisma and a master storyteller.

Once the community as a whole took note of Kelly's persona and competence, his practice began to thrive. In 1999 Kelly was able to purchase a craftsman-style house in the Azalea District, where he would open up his current office. As his reputation grew, so did the firm. Along with Diana, Kelly hired Brenda Torres as a paralegal in 2006 and, later, attorneys Brian Rollings and Jeff Wood.

Over the course of his career, Kelly tried over 100 jury trials, more than 250 bench trials, and defended both Federal and State cases. His passion and knowledge of the law was second to none. He was instrumental in the publication of the search-and-seizure manual used by attorneys throughout Texas. He was board certified in criminal law and each year would speak at seminars across the state—including Rusty Duncan and Advanced Criminal Law. He also dedicated much of his time to various local and state organizations. He served as

the president of the Smith County Criminal Defense Lawyers Association, as a Board Member of the Smith County Bar Association, and was on the Board of Directors and a Committee Chair for TCDLA.

The fact that Kelly was an addict motivated him to become educated on the topic so that he could help others. He understood that as a defense attorney he was in a unique position to not only help clients with their legal issues, but to counsel them on underlying issues such as addiction and depression as well. He was dedicated to helping other lawyers who struggled with addiction. Helping others become sober and free from depression was very meaningful to Kelly. This would ultimately become one of his most treasured accomplishments. To illustrate his selfless service to others, Kelly was given the Ralph A. Mock Memorial Award for Enduring Contribution to Texas Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers in 2016. It was an award that he was very proud and honored to receive.

The truth is, there are very few like R. Kelly Pace. Kelly was heartfelt and caring. He exuded confidence and strength, yet he had a way of speaking to others that made it so easy to trust him and turn to him in times of need. What was amazing was that he never abused that trait, and he never shied away from helping someone when they came to him for support. He had a number of obstacles in his life that he had to overcome, but he did so with a sense of humbleness that attracted people to him. When he passed away on November 1, 2018, he left a huge



Kelly and Therese Pace

void in the profession. However, we should all be grateful for one of the things he did leave behind, a template on how to practice law—with grit, determination, care, and compassion.



Therese and Kelly flank Christa Lockwood.



Brian Rollings received his JD from Texas Wesleyan University School of Law. He has served as president and vice president of the Smith County Criminal Defense Lawyers Association. Brian joined the law office of R. Kelly Pace in 2011, specializing in juvenile law. He is also a member of the State Bar of Texas Juvenile Section and the Texas Bar College. He can be reached at bmrollings@gmail.com.



Jeff Wood received his JD from Texas Wesleyan University School of Law. Beginning in 2009, he served as a prosecutor in Smith County, working his way up from a misdemeanor prosecutor to a first-chair felony prosecutor, before joining the R. Kelly Pace firm in 2015. Jeff has also served as vice president of the Smith County Criminal Defense Lawyers Association. He can be reached at jawood81@gmail.com.