

# The verdict is in: *Here comes the judge*

**Lions' centennial president is Chancellor Robert Corlew, elected in June at the convention in Japan. Entrusted with the reins of leadership in a pivotal year for Lions Clubs International, Corlew will be on trial, so to speak, for 2016-17.**

"I'm scared, humbled and energetic," he says with an easy laugh. "I think that during our centennial year we as Lions can have a tremendous impact on the world. We all have to work together, to pull together in every club, every zone, every district."

Serving in the limelight is not new to Corlew, 63. The Tennessee resident worked as a judge and chancellor for 30 years. As a chancellor, hearing civil cases, he ruled on several high-profile, contentious cases involving businesses and government. He also worked as lawyer, taught law, and, at age 29, served on the city council in Murfreesboro for two years.

Corlew's service as a Lion has been similarly impactful. Need and Corlew seemed to intersect. Once, when attending the charter night of a club as district governor, an epic storm hit the community, and flood waters raged, stranding people in their homes. The new band of Lions put down their knives and forks, jumped into motorboats and rescued frightened people.

## **A precocious youth**

Corlew comes from a sleepy town of 40,000. His father raised beef cattle and taught history at a university. The oldest of three children, he was unusually precocious. In second grade, he and a classmate started the 77 club, an imitation of the civic clubs to which Corlew's parents belonged (alas, not a Lions club). "You had to be seven to be in second grade, so that's where we got the name," he says.

Most of the class joined the 77 Club, and its main purpose was to hold a picnic – until they set their sights on "environmental protection", as Corlew puts it. The water fountain on the playground was leaking. "We kept the water from getting under the swings and slides," he says.

Just a year later, at age 8, Corlew continued to show a vibrant entrepreneurial spirit – a trait that came in handy years later when he was a Lion, when he went into the petrol sales business. A friend of his dad was an oil distributor, and his dad had a 200-gallon tank. Corlew bought the gas from his dad's friend at wholesale prices and sold it to neighbours at retail prices.

Sometimes his daring worked against him. When he was 8, he took his dad's two-month-old truck for a spin around the farm and crashed into the barn. As a constant reminder of his folly, his dad did not have the dent repaired.

Yet Corlew as a youth was an achiever, not a

delinquent. Interested in civics, he secured a position as a page for an Alabama senator and lived in Washington D.C. as a high school student. He shared an apartment with other pages, attended high school for three hours each morning and then spent the bulk of the day writing congratulatory form letters to constituents. "I did have dreams of being in government," recalls Corlew. "That did not happen, but my year in Washington had a big effect on me. I was walking on the Senate floor with a lot of folks I saw on television and in the newspapers."

Corlew actually became part of the media himself when he resumed high school. Before classes began, he would stop at a local station to read the news on-air. Corlew is gifted with a "radio voice" – deep yet pleasant. As a summer job in college he worked at another station in Murfreesboro. "He had a good voice, a good personality, willing to work cheap," explains Austin Jennings, the station owner who hired him. Jennings was not only a Lion but – in an eerie coincidence – became international president in 1988.

Corlew studied history, becoming president of his senior class. He also signed up for the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) and served in the Army Reserve for a dozen years before retiring.

He became a Lion in 1978 when he was a new lawyer. His introduction to Lions was quaint. A real estate agent who shared his office building, also working late one night, invited him to dinner. "He didn't tell me where we were going when we got into the car. It was a Lions meeting," he says. That turned out to be just fine. He knew many Lions already, and they welcomed him warmly.

His life got even richer when he met Dianne. His passion for cappuccino led to their meeting. Driving to a conference, he stopped for a cappuccino in the lounge at the law school where he taught. He bumped into the school's registrar, whose son was a patient of a doctor at a pediatric clinic where Dianne was a physician's assistant. "I think you should meet this doctor," the registrar suggested. Corlew did and also happened to meet Dianne. After a year of dating, they married.

The Corlews are the proud parents of five grown children and five grandchildren.

One of the most important lessons Corlew tried



*Lion Corlew does an eye screening at a school in Tennessee. Photo: Matt Michels*

to pass on to his children also applies to his life as a Lion. "We tried to teach the children that some people are fortunate and some are not as fortunate," he says. "Some people are smart and some are not. Some people have plenty of financial wherewithal and some don't. You've just got to respect everybody for the talents and abilities they have."

– Adapted from a story by Jay Copp

## **Corlew Confidential**

### **Scott Corlew, Corlew's brother and a surgeon**

"Bob said a friend told him this story. One day he [Bob] was eating lunch in a tiny little town. Some person pointed to him and said, 'You know he's one of the judges that come over here. You know I've been before all of them. That's the politest SOB that ever put me in jail.'"

### **Mary Catherine Seiver, sister**

"Bob is – I hate to say it – softhearted, but he is. He's a very kind person and empathetic. Even as a little girl if I had something like a toy break or an animal dying, Bob was certainly one of the folks I wanted to tell first. Because I knew he would understand and we'd have a little funeral."

### **Brent Pierce, an assistant district attorney who was a student and intern of Corlew's**

"In his role as judge, I would watch him in the courtroom. He was very patient. My impression before was that a judge is somebody that has to be very stern. But I learned by watching Chancellor Corlew that it's possible for a judge to have a kind spirit."