

TOP NEWS

Lawyer-minister who helped convict Smollett reflects on faith, law

BY NEIL STEINBERG

“Exclusive video,” Fox 32 News promised a few days ago, “shows ex-‘Empire’ actor’s first moments in Cook County Jail.”

Sigh.

I don’t blame the media. Have you ever driven past a car wreck and not taken a look? Nor do I blame the audience. There is something compelling about the Jussie Smollett case, an echoing mystery: How could this rich, handsome, apparently smart young man so methodically destroy his career?

Even now, with the actor convicted of staging a hate crime hoax out on bond and all of us waiting, maybe for a year, to see whether he has to spend a few richly-deserved months in jail. Attention must be paid.

Okay then, let’s pay attention.

But is there a law that says everything about the Jussie Smollett case has to be about Jussie Smollett?

Why not meet Sam Mendenhall instead?

Haven’t heard the name? Dan Webb, the special prosecutor assigned to the case after Kim Foxx made an absolute hash of it, wanted the jury to measure Smollett’s character, or lack of same, against a man like Mendenhall, a partner at Winston & Strawn.

“That is absolutely correct,” said Webb, executive co-chair at Winston. “The juxtaposition between Jussie Smollett and everything he did, compared to down-to-earth Sam



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SAM MENDENHALL, ON THE SMOLLETT CASE

Mendenhall, telling it like it is, talking about the evidence. He is a great lawyer.”

Mendenhall certainly had a steeper hill to climb. Smollett was a child model in New York City at 5 years old. Mendenhall grew up in Chicago public housing. Smollett started starring in movies at age 9. At 16, Mendenhall worked at the White Castle at 63rd and Cicero, across the street from Midway Airport.

The governor at the time, Jim

Thompson, would sometimes pop in for a few sliders. Once he posed for a photo with the kids working behind the counter — that picture is now framed in Mendenhall’s office.

“It turned out we would be law partners years later,” said Mendenhall. “He and I joked about it often.”

At 18, Smollett paused from acting to focus on singing.

“On my 18th birthday I went into the Army,” said Mendenhall. He graduated first in his training class, then went to college and law school.

He joined the firm in 1991.

“The first African-American to go from first year associate to equity partner,” he said. “That was nothing but faith, hard work, belief in myself and belief in God. Faith plays a tremendous part.”

Indeed it does.

“It’s been a journey of faith,” said Mendenhall, an ordained minister, pastor at the Grant Memorial AME Church, 4017 S. Drexel Ave.

Was he reluctant to get involved in the Smollett mess?

“I could have said ‘No,’” said Mendenhall. “But given my history of working with Dan, and the significance of this case ... we were asked to do it pro bono, and I saw it as another chance to give back.”

He brought a welcome bedrock of integrity to the tawdry proceedings.

“If you were to interview the jury on the Smollett case and ask who is the lawyer they remember, they’ll say the best was Sam Mendenhall,” said Webb. “He talked to them in simple, straightforward terms. That’s why I

wanted him to be part of the Smollett team.”

You don't run into many preacher-lawyers. How does faith in God help a person navigate the complexities of the law?

“Being a pastor had benefited me in the law for several reasons,” Mendenhall replied. “It has heightened my sense of integrity. The legal profession is nothing without integrity and ethics. It has always been a tremendous benefit to me to have the ability to walk into a courtroom trusting my faith. Trusting my preparation. Trusting, ultimately, that once I do my part the rest is in God's hands. My faith plays a huge role whenever I step into a court. I found juries really respect that. They come to trust me. When I say something, they know it is something that can be believed.”

Does Jussie Smollett ever wonder what that feels like, to say something and be believed? To live a life like Sam Mendenhall's, a life of faith and integrity, where you don't have to always be trying to plaster over your old lies with new ones?



Illinois Governor Jim Thompson, the gentleman in the suit, has long been a White Castle fan. Not long ago he visited Chicago No. 26 where this snapshot was taken, as he posed with a beaming Castle crew. From left: Pam Gaydos, Samuel Mendenhall, Gov. Thompson, Dawn Tulney, Dennis McNamara, Trisha Brown and Gail Soderlund.

Sam Mendenhall is glimpsed just to Jim Thompson's right in this photo from a White Castle employee newsletter. Eventually the two would be law partners at Winston & Strawn. PROVIDED