

On the Run Black gave challenge to young leaders

By Luke Stalon
Editor

By this time in the election cycle, the last thing most of us want to hear is another typical political speech.

I was not really looking forward to Stephen Black's presentation to the Lawrence County Chamber of Commerce's monthly luncheon Tuesday. It wound up being not what I was expecting.

Black's speech was atypical of a politician aspiring to statewide office. In Alabama, we're used to politicians appealing to the lowest common denominator, saying things the masses want to hear rather than what they need to hear.

It is no doubt that Black is a politician. He comes by it naturally. His grandfather, the late Hugo Black, rose out of rural Clay County to become a U.S. senator and later an associate justice on the U.S. Supreme Court.

But Stephen Black wasn't reared in Alabama. Coming to the state relatively recently, he brought with him an undergraduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a law degree from Yale.

hardly the credentials thought necessary for political success in the Deep South.



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He ran for state treasurer here in 2002, narrowly missing a win in his first political outing.

While now in private law practice in Birmingham, he stays involved in public affairs and teaches courses in civic involvement as an adjunct professor at the University of Alabama.

He is also active on the speaking circuit around the state.

His talk here this week, which was primarily aimed at members of the Chamber's Youth Leadership Lawrence class, was not a dose of canned political rhetoric.

He praised the members of the high school students' generation for reversing a national trend away from community involvement in charitable works.

However, he chided that same generation for failing to grasp the concept that they could not only help alleviate the symptoms of society's problems through their charitable works, but could also solve some of the underlying problems if they would set their minds to it.

His talk was insightful and challenging. He spoke with the confidence, conviction and passion of a hardshell Baptist preacher, using no notes and displaying an enthusiasm for the promise of what could be.

It was the first time I had heard him speak. His presentation shattered my ill-formed perception of him as a carpetbagger political opportunist who came here to take advantage of the family name.

It left me more optimistic that some day our state will find the kind of leader who will bring our diverse interests together to really solve some problems instead of just applying Band-Aids to them.