

# Widener University Delaware Law School

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## Dedication to Dean Donald L. Burnett

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## **DEDICATION TO DEAN DONALD L. BURNETT**

For ten years, Donald L. Burnett served as Dean of the Brandeis School of Law and many changes occurred in our community during his tenure. One of the major changes is the obvious commitment he has made to diversity and achievement. Dean Burnett consistently recognized that supporting diversity requires many efforts across the institution. Through his efforts and the commitment of those who share his ideals, the law school has become a welcoming place for students, staff and faculty of color.

As Dean, Don Burnett committed his energies and the resources of the law school to diversity issues across the curriculum, throughout the student body, staff, administration, and faculty, and in the programmatic efforts of the school. Dean Burnett demonstrated the critical importance of assuming a leadership role in an institution through his sustained commitment to enriching our law school's environment as a place committed to diversity and achievement.

In support of diversity in the student body, Dean Burnett expanded scholarship commitments to students of color through his development efforts. In the 1999-2000 academic year, the Brandeis School of Law had approximately as many people of color in its student body as Kentucky's two other law schools combined. Further, the graduation rate of students of color has improved dramatically because of the Dean's leadership in changing administrative policies that disproportionately impacted students of color and devoting resources to comprehensive student support for all students.

During Dean Burnett's tenure, the law school devoted more than financial resources in support of a diverse student body. Dean Burnett created important bridges with the local bar. He was instrumental in building a community among the Kentucky National Bar Association and students of color through annual events that bring together the local bar, new and continuing students, and alumni. It is this community that has become an important source of support for students of color, easing the transition to law school and later to the bar.

The physical environment of the law school further establishes the commitment to diversity. The law school has a permanent display of photographs, recognizing African American pioneers in Kentucky law, entitled "We Stand on Their Shoulders." The dedication of the display was featured in

a program that included a video chronicle, "A Legacy of Leadership," of the career successes of ten African American Kentuckians whose aspirations and determination broke ground in the areas of racial justice and equal opportunity. The photograph display and video chronicle create an important historical record. The walls speak to the entire community and tell us that the law school is a place that celebrates the contributions of all people.

Dean Burnett's efforts have been the building blocks for constructing a community at the law school that values excellence and demonstrates a commitment to diversity. The list of prominent people of color who have lectured at the law school is extensive and impressive. Dean Burnett did more than create the opportunity for the law school community and larger community to celebrate the successes of these outstanding individuals. Don Burnett illustrated leadership by honoring many voices of prominent people of color in our profession whose voices had not previously been heard in our community. The speakers have included the late Barbara Jordan, Congressional Representative of Texas and Professor at the University of Texas; Professor Charles Ogletree of Harvard Law School; the late Honorable Leon Higgenbotham, United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit; Honorable Nathaniel Jones, United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit; Honorable Justice Alan Page, Minnesota Supreme Court; Congressional Representative John Lewis of Georgia; Professor Gerald Torres, University of Texas; Professor Lani Guinier, University of Pennsylvania; Honorable Pamela Carter (Indiana's first African American attorney general); Larry EchoHawk of Idaho (the nation's first Native American state attorney general); and Professor Brenda Grant, University of Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

Also, the faculty-student Diversity Committee in the law school is a model for other units throughout the University of Louisville because of the breadth of issues addressed in the programs sponsored by the Committee, and the interest the programs have sparked within the law school community as well as the broader community. The Dean's financial commitment to the Diversity Committee's programs, as well as his warm welcome to speakers and eloquent introductions of events, illustrate his leadership.

Dean Burnett supported diversity at the faculty level as well. The increase in faculty of color that occurred during his tenure at the law school is remarkable. There are three tenured faculty of color, one of whom is the incoming Associate Dean of Academic Affairs. There are also two tenure-track faculty of color who have chosen to begin their academic careers at the

Brandeis School of Law. The law school is now among the most diverse in the country in terms of the number of faculty of color in relation to the total faculty.

Dean Burnett has provided support to the faculty of color in other ways as well. The law school provided critical financial support to the Third Annual Mid-Atlantic People of Color Scholarship Conference (MAPOC Conference) which was held at the school in February 1997 and sponsored by Professors Powell, Trucios-Haynes and Williams. The 1997 MAPOC Conference was the first of a series of conferences that led to the publication of conference presentations in law school journals. The *Brandeis Law Journal*, formerly the *Journal of Family Law*, published the articles and presentations of the conference participants in the [Vol 35, Issue 4, and Vol 36, Issues 1 and 2] editions.

In sum, Dean Burnett has shown our community the value of diversity and achievement through his sustained commitment to a wide variety of initiatives. He is a leader because of his willingness to advance the issues of diversity throughout the entire community and through his wide-ranging efforts on behalf of the Brandeis School of Law. We are enriched by his commitment and the law school is a better place because he has set a high standard of excellence.

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