

# STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

*Local attorneys reflect on their rich history and contributions to society*

By: Sharrolyn Jackson Miles<sup>1</sup>



On Saturday, October 17, 2009, the New Orleans Martinet Foundation, Inc. and the Greater New Orleans Louis A. Martinet Society, Inc. hosted their annual Scholarship Gala. The theme of the gala was “Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: Remembering Our Legacy Through History and Education.” The evening’s event was held at the legendary Dooky Chase Restaurant, a known gathering place for the original founders of the Society and for attorneys and others who participated in the Civil Rights movement. Dooky Chase, the owner of the restaurant which opened its doors in 1940, welcomed the opportunity to host such an important event for the members of the organization decades later. The focus of the gala was to enlighten a new generation of attorneys about the struggles that the founders had to endure in order to open up pathways for African-American attorneys in the state today. WDSU news anchor and investigative correspondent, Camille Whitworth, served as the Mistress of Ceremony.

As befitting the gala’s theme, several notable pioneer African-American attorneys were in attendance at the event: Robert Collins, one of the first African-Americans to attend law school at Louisiana State University, and civil rights activist Lolis E. Elie. Elie, Collins, and their now deceased law partner, Nils Douglas, served as attorneys for the Consumers’ League, a group of black civil rights activists who protested discriminatory employment practices. They were also the primary firm for the Congress of Racial Equality in Louisiana. Elie spoke a few kind words in honor of Johnnie Anderson Jones, the gala’s keynote speaker and the 2009 Lifetime Achievement Award honoree.

Johnnie Anderson Jones is one of the giants whose accomplishments the gala participants convened to celebrate, though he is reluctant to accept the title. Jones was one of the original founders of the Martinet Society, which, at the time it was founded in 1957, was comprised of the only twenty-two black attorneys in the state. As the number of African-American attorneys and judges has increased

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<sup>1</sup> Ms. Miles is an associate in the New Orleans office of McGlinchey Stafford, PLLC. She was recently elected as President-Elect of the Greater New Orleans Louis A. Martinet Society, Inc., the local affiliate of the National Bar Association.

throughout the state, the Martinet organization has branched off to include chapters in New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Lake Charles, Central Louisiana, Northeast Louisiana, and Monroe. This expansion is a monument to the hard work and accomplishments of its fore founders, including Jones.

Jones was one of the first graduates of the Southern University Law Center in 1953, and the only one of his classmates who was able to graduate; he boasts that he had the honor of graduating both at the top and bottom of his class. At the time, bar examiners and accreditors put up many hurdles to prevent African-Americans from pursuing legal careers. Although there were only a handful of students in his class, by the time of graduation, he was the only student left.

A decorated veteran of World War II who assaulted Omaha Beach on D-Day and later fought in the Battle of the Bulge, Jones returned to Baton Rouge to study and practice law, only to find himself routinely arrested merely because he was a black man practicing law in the state. Jones remembers fighting for the opportunity to even attend meetings held by the Louisiana State Bar Association. A few months out of law school, Jones was hired by Rev. T.J. Jemison to lead the legal battle in the Baton Rouge bus boycott. Jones met with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to discuss strategy and issues related to the boycott, and his legal work eventually became a part of Dr. King's history-making Birmingham bus boycott.

In the 1960s, Jones defended Southern University students arrested in a sit-in at a downtown Baton Rouge department store and also the plaintiffs in the East Baton Rouge Parish school desegregation case. In 1972, Jones became one of five African-American members of the state House of Representatives. In 2009, Jones was honored with the opportunity to attend the inauguration of President Barack Obama at the invitation of U.S. Senator Mary Landrieu. Even more impressive, Jones may be honored with the opportunity to celebrate his 90th birthday at the White House, which is fitting as he was one of the many who helped paved the way for a society where a person would not be limited by the color of their skin.

During his acceptance speech, Jones encouraged the attorneys and others in the room to remember the contributions of those that came before him and especially the contributions of the leaders from Louisiana. According to Jones, the civil rights battles began in 1858 with *Dred Scott v. Sandford*<sup>2</sup> and continued through *Plessy v. Ferguson*.<sup>3</sup> Of *Dred Scott*, Jones said, "We only saw one thing

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<sup>2</sup> *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1856).

<sup>3</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

in that decision; that a black man had no right that a white man had to respect.” Jones warned the newer generations of attorneys that the fight for equal rights is not over, citing the recent controversy regarding interracial marriage in Tangipahoa Parish. Jones himself has not given up the fight, despite his age; he continues to practice law in Baton Rouge.

Several other awards were presented during the gala, in addition to the Lifetime Achievement Award given to Jones. Retired Judge Calvin Johnson was awarded the Distinguished Jurist Award. Judge Johnson is a past-president of The Greater New Orleans Louis A. Martinet Legal Society and currently serves as the Executive Director of the Metropolitan Human Services District. He served as the fifth African-American Chief Judge of Orleans Parish Criminal Court and as a staff attorney for the Orleans Parish Indigent Defender’s Program. Judge Johnson is an adjunct Law Professor at Loyola University School of Law and is a founder of the Orleans Parish Mental Health Treatment Center. In addition to receiving the Distinguished Jurist Award, Judge Johnson also had the privilege of introducing Johnnie Jones as the keynote speaker. In a tear-jerking tribute, Judge Johnson explained that he is who he is because of Johnnie Jones, Lolis Elie, Bob Collins and their brave colleagues. He stated that he strived to be like them and looked up to them in high school, college, and as a young attorney; they were the actual giants upon whose shoulders he stood.

Derrick Edwards was honored with the Presidential Award of Merit. Edwards is a New Orleans native and graduate of Loyola University School of Law. He is the ultimate example of what can be accomplished through hard work and endurance in spite of obstacles life may throw your way. Edwards, a vibrant young African-American attorney, was rendered paralyzed from the neck down as a result of a catastrophic football injury during his senior year in high school. In spite of his injury, Edwards was not only able to finish high school on time, but went on to receive his bachelor’s degree from Tulane University’s A. B. Freeman School of Business and a master’s degree in Accounting. In 2003, Edwards graduated from Loyola University College of Law and is now practicing law as an associate at Usry, Weeks, & Matthews, APLC. He has never let his condition prevent him from reaching out. Shortly after his injury, Edwards began to commit himself to community service, particularly in the area of public speaking and advocating for the rights of disabled citizens. He has appeared for public speaking engagements at schools and churches, and speaks with individuals with recent spinal cord injuries at Children’s Hospital, Ochsner and other local hospitals in the New Orleans area. Edwards’ message emphasizes the importance of education, and overcoming obstacles to achieve one’s goals. He has served as a board member of

the Jefferson Parish Human Services Authority and the Mayor's Advisory Committee for Citizens with Disabilities.

In addition to the awards presented at the gala, Louisiana State Senator Cheryl Gray honored Louisiana State Bar President Kim M. Boyle with a resolution on behalf of the state legislature and all of the Martinet and black lawyer organizations across the state. Ms. Boyle, a long time member of the Greater New Orleans Louis A. Martinet Legal Society, and the first female African-American president of the state bar, has played an instrumental role in ongoing efforts to reorganize the statewide chapter of the Martinet Society.

The purpose of the annual gala is to raise proceeds for scholarships to be award to deserving law students. An essay competition was held prior to this year's gala and was open to law students from all four Louisiana law schools. The topic for the essay contest was whether a claim of racial discrimination brought by a white woman discharged from her job for having a biracial child is cognizable under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The first place winner, Pablo Reyes, a second year student attending Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law School, received an award in the amount of \$2,000. The second place winner, Melody Udoinyion, a second year student attending Southern University Law Center, received a \$1,000 scholarship.