



Celebrating Diversity in Law:

Tulane Law School Celebrates 50 Years of Graduating Black Lawyers

By Chief U.S. Magistrate Judge Karen Wells Roby

Tulane Law School began graduating African-American students in 1968 during a time when the civil rights movement began and tensions were high. It was the same year that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis.¹ Richard Nixon had been elected president and the Vietnam War was in full force.

Against this backdrop of tumultuous times in America, in Louisiana, positive change began to take place. In May 1968, Michael A. Starks became the first black male to graduate from Tulane Law School. Starks, a public servant, worked in the New Orleans area as an attorney for the City of New Orleans



In May 1968, Michael A. Starks became the first black male to graduate from Tulane Law School. Photo provided by Tulane Law School.

and the Housing Authority (HANO). Described as a kind and gentle spirit, Starks was always willing to help others and would return to Tulane to share his wisdom.

While Starks was preparing to graduate in 1968, Janice Martin Foster had joined the entering law school class of 1967. In the fall of 1967, Foster walked into Tulane Law School as one of only four women starting courses that year. "It took me a little while, but I didn't realize that I was the only black woman until I got to class and no one looked like me," she recalled.

Foster became the law school's first black woman graduate in 1970, two years after Starks. Foster was only the second black law graduate. Not just in one class, Foster was tops in a number of classes. Her grades enabled her to join the staff of the prestigious *Tulane Law Review* and she eventually became associate editor.

Foster graduated Order of the Coif, an honor bestowed on the top 10 percent of the graduating class. "I know some older stu-

dents paved the way for me into the city's law firms," she said, which led to her clerkship at Jones Walker LLP. She stayed there her entire career, mostly advising clients on the preparation of wills, marital trusts, exemption trusts, life insurance trusts, powers of attorney and charitable gifts.

It is the history of Starks and Foster and the 1,000 other black lawyers who have graduated from Tulane Law School that was celebrated the weekend of Feb. 8-10, which marked the 50th year of graduating African-American lawyers. In recognition of their success and the impact that Tulane has had on graduating black lawyers, the law school honored graduates from 1968-79. The honorees were:

► Class of 1972: Donald J. Bernard and Ronald P. Nabonne.

► Class of 1973: Terrel J. Broussard, Sandra Carter and George V. Perez, Jr.

► Class of 1974: Victor A. Dubuclet III, Hattie M. Broussard, Wayne J. Lee and Charles L. Scott.

(Above) Several 1968-79 graduates of Tulane Law School were recognized during the Tulane Black Law Alumni Reunion the weekend of Feb. 8-10. The event marked the 50th year of Tulane's graduating African-American lawyers. Graduates recognized included, seated from left, Janice Martin Foster, class of 1970, the law school's first black woman graduate; Hattie M. Broussard, class of 1974; Theon A. Wilson, class of 1976; Avis M. Russell, class of 1979; and Rosa H. Edwards, class of 1978. Standing from left, Ronald P. Nabonne, class of 1972; Terrel J. Broussard, class of 1973; Judge Ulysses G. Thibodeaux, class of 1975; Judge (Ret.) Michael G. Bagneris, class of 1975; Ronald L. Wilson, class of 1975; Wayne J. Lee, class of 1974; Donald J. Bernard, class of 1972; and Judge (Ret.) Donald T. Johnson, class of 1977. Standing far right is Tulane Law School Dean David D. Meyer. Photo by Tracie Morris Schaefer from Studio U.

► Class of 1975: Michael G. Bagneris, Ulysses G. Thibodeaux and Ronald L. Wilson.

► Class of 1976: Charles R. Grady and Theon A. Wilson.

► Class of 1977: Geraldine P. Caliste, Jean Charles, Darryl A. Derbigny and Donald T. Johnson.

► Class of 1978: Rosa H. Edwards, Brenda Fluker and J. Forrest Johnson.

► Class of 1979: Avis M. Russell, Clifton A. Vaughn and Vince A. Bartholomew.

The weekend opened with the Dreyfous Lecture on Civil Liberties and Human Rights given by University of Pennsylvania Law Professor Dorothy E. Roberts, an acclaimed scholar of race, gender and the law. Political activist and CNN and NPR legal analyst Angela Rye provided the keynote address on the role of the black lawyer in today's political climate. Black law alumni traveled from across the country to "Reunite, Reconnect and Reflect."

Sherri Jefferson (Law Class, 1994) made the trek from California back to New Orleans with few specific expectations about what the school's inaugural Black Law Alumni Reunion would bring. "I thought it would be nice to hear this panel or that panel and maybe see some of my old classmates," she said. "But from the first panel (the Dreyfous Lecture on Civil Liberties and Human Rights featuring Dorothy Roberts), I was riveted. Everything after that was the same way."

Jefferson said she was impressed with panels on pioneering black alumni, on advancing a career as a black lawyer, on creating opportunities for others who follow, and on race and gender and the law. She thought the choice of keynote speaker, Angela Rye, known for challenging institutional norms on race and gender, "showed how Tulane Law is open to having a diversity of opinions on campus."

The reunion was a marquee moment for the law school, celebrating 50 years of achievement by black alumni and honoring the graduation of the man who broke barriers and desegregated Tulane Law in 1968, Michael Starks. "I am pleased by, and proud of, the administration for conceiving, planning and fully supporting this event," Jefferson wrote in her post-reunion survey. "I have never felt as valued an alumna as I did this past weekend."

The alumni attending the reunion

spanned the decades, with the early pioneering graduates (numbering in single digits) joining the big, boisterous classes of the 1980s and 1990s (some with more than 50 black students in them).

Tulane Law School Dean David D. Meyer noted, "Many of these graduates, like Starks, have gone on to careers of great distinction and impact — as leaders of law firms, judges, academics, public servants and entrepreneurs — and have transformed communities across the nation."

During the weekend, emotions ran high from the first panel that highlighted the stories of early graduates and the hardships they overcame as they trickled into the profession to the last farewell brunch when the classes of the late 1960s and the 1970s were honored for their pioneering achievements.

Michael D. Pegues (Law Class, 1991), a shareholder at Polsinelli, P.C., in the firm's Dallas and Houston, Texas, offices, put it succinctly on his Instagram feed along with a photo of those trailblazing graduates: "The Tulane Law School welcomed home its African-American alumni this weekend, and it was all red carpet, all weekend," he wrote. "These alums made it possible for me to attend Tulane Law School and ultimately provide for my family. Thank you for your perseverance, endurance and determination."

Larry English (Law Class, 1983), CEO of English Consulting Group with a long career in construction law and public service, spoke during a career-centered panel and attended several others including one celebrating 40 years of clinical education at his alma mater. He said the weekend was an emotional one for him. "Tulane Law School changed the trajectory of my life. I was the first in my family to go to college," he said. "I have a grandson living in a world I could not have imagined. Ultimately, whatever he accomplishes can be traced back to the fact that his grandfather graduated from Tulane Law School, so this is a very emotional weekend for me. It all just came home for me."

The weekend was not only a celebration of the past 50 years but also an acknowledgment of the next 50 years of future black Tulane Law students. The school commissioned New Orleans artist Dwayne Conrad to commemorate the event and acknowledge its black law alumni history with an acrylic on canvas painting titled "Silent No More." It depicts

the journey of the first African-Americans to integrate Tulane Law School. The artist enlisted the aid of university archives, court documents and personal photos as he crafted this visual remembrance. The painting, commissioned by Tulane University, will occupy a place of prominence in the Law School as a permanent tribute to the courage and determination of these two civil rights champions.

The weekend continued with CLEs; a ball at the New Orleans Jazz Reunion featuring New Orleans artist Gina Brown; a Jazz Brunch at Tulane's Glazer Stadium honoring graduates from 1968-79 and Starks and Foster; and a video presentation of a documentary film, "The Legacy of Tulane Law's Black Alumni, the First 50 Years" produced by BMM Productions.

Recognizing the talent and history of its alumni, Tulane launched a yearlong celebration of black law alumni achievement beginning in May 2018. Throughout 2019, events in the law school and around the country have reflected on the contributions of its black law alumni. The celebration of diversity will continue. The next Tulane Black Law Alumni Reunion is set for February 2023.

Since 1968, Tulane Law School has graduated more than 1,000 African-American students and more than 2,000 students of color. What began with one remarkable man now makes up roughly a fifth of all Tulane Law graduates since Mr. Starks' graduation.

FOOTNOTE

1. "The Day that Hope Died," www.smithsonianmag.com/history/revisiting-sanitation-workers-strike-180967512/, January 2018.

Chief U.S. Magistrate Judge Karen Wells Roby, with the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana since 1999, is a Tulane Law School graduate. She is a former president of the Federal Magistrate Judges Association (FMJA) and received the 2016 FMJA Founder's Award. She received the Louisiana State Bar Association's (LSBA) 2017 Chief Justice Bernette Joshua Johnson Trailblazer Award. She served as co-chair of the American Bar Association's Litigation Section's Diversity and Inclusion Committee. As the coordinating judicial officer of the LSBA's Suit Up for the Future Program, she annually inspires diverse groups of high school students to consider the legal profession. (karen_robby@laed.uscourts.gov; 500 Poydras St., New Orleans, LA 70130)

