

## VSB Member Receives Thurgood Marshall Award at ABA Annual Meeting

Lawrence R. Baca, who has been cited for having worked on more civil rights cases involving American Indians than any other attorney in the history of the Department of Justice, was recently honored by the ABA for his considerable achievements. He was presented with the American Bar Association Thurgood Marshall Award for 2012 by the Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities at the August 4, 2012, annual meeting in Chicago.

Baca, a member of the Virginia State Bar since 1977, retired in 2008 after thirty-two years with the United States DOJ in the Civil Rights Division and the Office of Tribal Justice. Cases he worked on include the first DOJ case to secure the rights of American Indians to run for state or county office; the first case to secure the right of American Indians, whose languages are historically unwritten, to receive election information orally in their own language; and the first case in which a federal court ruled that American Indians have a right under the 14th Amendment to equal educational opportunities from the states in which they live because they are citizens of those states. Baca also filed DOJ's first five racial redlining cases to enforce the Equal Credit Opportunity Act and all of them were on behalf of Native Americans. *Indian Country Today*, the largest circulation Indian-owned newspaper in the country, called him "the grandfather of Indian country credit."

"Tonight you have planted me among the tall trees of our profession and of the civil rights movement," Baca told the audience at the awards dinner.

The redlining cases "brought about a credit revolution in Indian country," Baca said. "Two federal banking regulatory agencies changed their anti-discrimination regulations with respect to residents of Indian reservations, citing my cases against General Motors

Acceptance Corporation and The Great Western Bank as precedent. The doors to fair credit access for Indians were flung open."

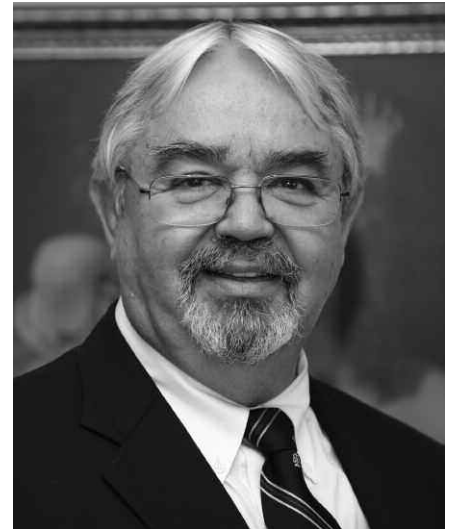
In a 2002 interview, Baca said one of the most vivid memories of his childhood was the scars he saw on his father's chest. Baca's father was stabbed twenty-seven times when he accidentally went into a "white's only" bar in 1939. His attackers were never charged. As everyone from the sheriff to the attorneys in the state attorney general's office was white, there was little hope for justice for an American Indian in that time and place.

This memory drove Baca to law school and led to his life's mission.

"It's important to see people of all color," Baca said during the interview. He said the presence of minorities in the courtroom is crucial to the realization of justice, noting that people are more comfortable and more confident that they're getting a fair hearing if there are others there like them.

Baca, a Pawnee Indian, said his most important contribution at DOJ was, "I changed the face of the Department of Justice by recruiting more American Indian attorneys to the department." He was an active recruiter and role model. When he arrived at the DOJ there was one other American Indian attorney. By the 1990s there were twenty-six American Indian attorneys at main justice. Baca says he didn't recruit every American Indian lawyer who has ever worked at the DOJ, but the ones he didn't recruit most likely were recruited by someone who he did recruit.

The Thurgood Marshall Award is just one of the major honors he has received. In February 2008, the ABA presented him with its Spirit of Excellence Award for his work on diversity in the legal profession and for opening doors at the DOJ for American Indian lawyers. In April 2008, the Indian Law Section of the Federal Bar Association created the



Lawrence R. Baca Lifetime Achievement Award for Excellence in Federal Indian Law to honor his career as a bar leader and civil rights lawyer. He was the first recipient. Also in April 2008, immediately before his DOJ retirement celebration, Baca was presented with the Attorney General's Medallion by then Attorney General Michael B. Mukasey. It is the highest award the attorney general can present to a retiring employee and had only been presented six times since 2000.

"I am not sure how you respond to any of those honors except with complete humility. The Federal Bar Association has a very small number of awards that are named after individuals. That puts me in a pretty exclusive class. I am humbled by the gesture of my FBA colleagues. And it was my co-workers at the Office of Tribal Justice who nominated me for the Attorney General's Medallion. That was a bit overwhelming," Baca said.

On September 12, 2009, Baca was inaugurated as national president of the 16,000 member Federal Bar Association. He made history in becoming the first American Indian president of a national non-minority bar association.

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His tenure in the FBA includes founding the Indian Law Section, which he chaired for twenty years while increasing the attendance at its annual Federal Indian Law conference from 225 to 750. When Baca stepped down as chair of the section, he was elected to the FBA national leadership ladder, where he served as secretary, treasurer and president-elect on his way to becoming president. He has also been very active in the National Native American Bar Association (NNABA) where he is the only person to have served as NNABA president three times. At the ABA, he served on the Committee on Problems of the American Indian, the Council on Racial Justice, and the Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the

Profession and he was chair of the commission for three years.

A 1976 graduate of Harvard Law School, he was the first American Indian ever hired at the United States DOJ through the Attorney General's Honor Law Program. At the time of his retirement he was on detail as the deputy director of the DOJ Office of Tribal Justice.

Baca also accepted a position as an adjunct professor at American University's Washington College of Law, where he taught for two years while still an attorney at the DOJ and then taught Federal Indian Law for one semester at Howard University School of Law.

Now that he is retired, Baca says he will do some pro bono consulting, and rewrite his syllabus for Federal Indian Law and look for another

adjunct position. "After practicing law for thirty-two years, you have to give back to the legal educational system that gave you the career you enjoyed," he said. "Otherwise, I'm a retired guy with a new camera."

Baca is the second member of the VSB to receive the Thurgood Marshall Award; Oliver W. Hill received the award in 1994. Baca paid homage to Hill during his acceptance speech.