

Virginia Leader and Legend Honored by the President

by Laura E. Dalpino

On August 11, 1999, Oliver W. Hill was presented with the nation's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, for his work in civil rights.

"In the 45 years since the Supreme Court handed down its landmark decision in Brown v. the Board of Education . . . Oliver Hill has barely had time to catch his breath," said President Clinton in his remarks at the White House ceremony. "Throughout his long and rich life, he has challenged the laws of our land and the conscience of our country. He has stood up for equal pay, better schools, fair housing—for everything that is necessary to make America truly, one, indivisible and equal."

U.S. Senator Charles S. Robb nominated Hill for the award in November 1998. John A. C. Keith, then-current VSB President, supported the nomination in a letter to the White House noting that Hill, in addition to his civil rights activism, served the Virginia State Bar as a member of the disciplinary board and judiciary committee.

Hill earned his law degree at Howard University Law School, where he graduated second only to close friend and future

"In truth, there is one quality that I admire above all others—and that quality is courage. I've seen courage on the battlefield, I've seen individual acts of personal courage. I've even seen political courage on a few occasions. But it is truly difficult for me to imagine the courage it took fifty or sixty years ago for any American of African ancestry to dream of equality in America and to fight, again and again and again, to chip away at a segregated world."

—Comments made by Senator Charles S. Robb while announcing Oliver Hill's Medal of Freedom at the Virginia NAACP reception on May 21, 1999.

Reconstruction era. Although a subsequent re-election campaign was unsuccessful, many people believe that Hill's election to city council opened the door for future African-American politicians.

Hill and his team of advocates were constantly embroiled in a battle against separate but equal policies, unfair housing practices, and inadequate education and school facilities. The team, which once had 75 open cases, filed more civil rights suits in Virginia than in any other state during the segregation era.

Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall. Hill began his civil rights career defending black clients on a variety of criminal charges, including those who had been unjustly accused. He made his first major mark in the civil rights arena in 1940 when he handled the case that equalized salaries for teachers in Virginia.

Eight years and another milestone later, Hill became the first black elected to the Richmond City Council since the



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President Clinton congratulates Oliver Hill after presenting him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in a ceremony in the East Room of the White House, August 11, 1999

"Most of the time you get your satisfaction when you find that people need your help and you voluntarily help them," said Hill in a 1998 interview with the *Virginia Lawyer*. "We never turned down any cases. Even when we were supposed to get paid, and sometimes we didn't."

As a member of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, led by Marshall, Hill succeeded in striking down segregation within the school system with the landmark verdict of Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka.

Hill has practiced law in Richmond since 1939. Until his retirement last year from Hill, Tucker and Marsh, where he was a partner, he was active in the firm's day-to-day business. Today, Richmond's new juvenile court building is named in Oliver Hill's honor. A bronze bust of Hill by artist Paul Di Pasquale holds a place of honor at the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia. ☪

The citation on Hill's Presidential Medal of Freedom reads as follows:

OLIVER WHITE HILL

A courageous civil rights advocate, Oliver Hill has devoted his life to building a more just and inclusive America. As a trial lawyer, he won landmark cases that secured equal rights for African Americans in education, employment, housing, voting, and jury selection. Successfully litigating one of the school desegregation cases later decided by the Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education, he played a key role in overturning the "separate but equal" doctrine. For his unyielding efforts to improve the lives of his fellow Americans and his unwavering dedication to justice for all, our Nation honors Oliver Hill.