

# Oliver White Hill 1907–2007

by Howard W. Martin Jr., 2007–08 VSB President



I had the privilege of meeting Oliver White Hill on only two occasions. But one did not have to know Mr. Hill personally to understand and benefit from the strength of his convictions and the example of his life and his career. I count us all fortunate to have lived in his time and to have known him, even from afar.

Oliver White Hill, who died August 5, 2007, at the age of one hundred, practiced law in Virginia for more than sixty years and left a legacy that bespeaks integrity, perseverance, and protection of the Rule of Law.

He grew up in Roanoke at a time when bullying and reports of lynchings haunted cities and towns across America. He attended a public school system that educated African-Americans only to the eighth grade, so he moved to Washington, D.C., to earn a high school diploma that would qualify him for college.

He wanted to be a lawyer. He wanted to take on racial discrimination and put America on a straighter path toward justice for all. He saw the U.S. Constitution as a living document, and he resolved to hold it to its promises.

Mr. Hill attended Howard University Law School, where he became a disciple of Dean Charles Hamilton Houston, a demanding educator who dreamed of placing African-American lawyers in every community of the nation. Mr. Hill, with fellow Howard alumni Thurgood Marshall, Spottswood W. Robinson III, and others, undertook, with considerable success, a range of civil rights causes that included use of public transportation, right to employment, and access to public places for assembly and recreation, as well as education.

As the legal successes grew, so did threats against Mr. Hill and his family. A cross was burned on his lawn. His family received harassing telephone calls. Members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—an important source of the funds that supported his work—were targeted with legal and economic harassment.

Through it all, Oliver Hill had faith in the Rule of Law, and he dedicated his life to ensuring that it applied to all Americans. He relentlessly and brilliantly faced down injustice and oppression, employing the tools of

scholarship, tempered argument, consummate civility, and sound legal strategy. Because of his work, America has advanced toward the ideal espoused in our Declaration of Independence, that all are created equal before the law.

Mr. Hill persevered through years of litigation capped by 1954's *Brown v. Board of Education*. As he contributed profoundly toward changing the course of justice in America, he embodied concepts the Virginia State Bar stresses in its Harry L. Carrico Professionalism Course: He was a man of integrity, a citizen lawyer, one who worked with the poor for little recompense, and a person who conducted himself with impeccable manners and civility.

In 1992, Mr. Hill was named the second recipient of the Lewis F. Powell Jr. Pro Bono Award. He credited Justice Powell, as Richmond's school board chair, with keeping the city's public schools open during the travails of desegregation. Mr. Hill endorsed Mr. Powell for the U.S. Supreme Court, and the two maintained a friendship into Justice Powell's last years.

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A winner of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, Mr. Hill worked on a national stage but remained a man of his community and the Commonwealth. He mentored future judges at his Richmond law firm, Hill, Tucker & Marsh. Among them: James W. Benton Jr. of the Virginia Court of Appeals; Margaret P. Spencer, Richard D. Taylor Jr. and the late Randall G. Johnson of the Richmond Circuit; Gary A. Hicks of the Henrico Circuit; John W. Scott Jr. of the Fredericksburg Circuit; and Julian W. Johnson of Stafford Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court.

At the Virginia State Bar, Mr. Hill was a valued and active volunteer. He was instrumental in founding the section that grew into the Senior Lawyers Conference, and he served on that section's board for many years. He also was on the Special Committee on Bench-Bar Relations. He lent his name to the VSB's Pro Bono Award, given annually since 2002 to an outstanding law student. Even when he was in fragile health toward the end of his life, Mr. Hill often attended the award ceremonies and extended his thanks to the young lawyers who seek to emulate his work.

Mr. Hill stood at the summit of attorneys who face opposition and animus with unrelenting courtesy, ready humor, and refusal to succumb to anger. His personal life was rich and filled with people who loved him and with fellow lawyers who respected him beyond measure.

Oliver White Hill epitomized the best of Virginia lawyers. As Virginians, we are all better for the legacy of this most distinguished, gentle, and dignified of souls.