STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS of GIANTS

THE STORY BEHIND THE INAUGURAL JAMES B. PARSONS LEGACY DINNER

By Claire Parins

When the Honorable Ann Claire Williams, an African American and the only judge of color to serve on the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, was chosen to receive the Law School’s inaugural James B. Parsons Legacy Award earlier this year, she was thrilled. Parsons, ’49, the first Black federal district court judge to be appointed in the continental United States, is one of her heroes.

Now he’s also a hero to André J. Washington, ’19, one of the students who ultimately proposed and planned the award dinner. But until last October, Washington hadn’t known that Parsons was a University of Chicago Law School alumnus. It just hadn’t ever come up.

“We chose Parsons because he was one of the first Black students to graduate from the Law School. I also thought it was a huge milestone for him to be the first Black person to be appointed a federal judge on a US district court and to receive life tenure. It was especially relevant given the history of Black people in this country,” Washington said.

Last academic year, Washington and other members of the Law School’s Black Law Students Association created the James B. Parsons Legacy Dinner to shine a light on minority judges who were also good role models, choosing Williams as their first honoree. Nearly 120 alumni, students, faculty, and other guests attended the inaugural celebration.

Williams has a long list of firsts. She was one of the first two African-American women to serve as law clerks on the Seventh Circuit. After working as an assistant US attorney in Chicago, she was the first woman of color to serve as a supervisor in that office and was later promoted to chief of a criminal division. She was the first chief of the Organized Drug Enforcement Task Force, where she was responsible for a five-state region, and has led both local and national efforts to expand opportunities for minorities and women.

Williams started Just the Beginning—A Pipeline Organization in 1992 to encourage underrepresented students to pursue career and leadership opportunities in the law. Through Just the Beginning, hundreds of students...
Kimberly Waters, ’19, one of the event’s organizers, said Washington approached a group of BLSA members and said, “Did you know that the first Black federal trial court judge with life tenure was a University of Chicago law student?” None of them did. A fire was lit.

The students quickly built a project plan. They met with then-Dean of Students Shannon Bartlett, and the Law School became a cosponsor for the dinner. Washington contacted potential law firm sponsors, as well as Parsons’s grandson and Williams. For much of Winter Quarter, the organizers—who included Washington; Laurel Hattix, ’19; Ngozi Osuji, ’19; and Waters—met once a week.

The students invited approximately 60 students, primarily 1Ls and students from different affinity groups, including the Asian Pacific American Law Students Association, the Latino/a Law Students Association, and the Law Women’s Caucus. The planning committee wanted to honor Williams and Parsons, but the dinner was also about making meaningful connections and creating an

of color and those from low-income backgrounds have interned in federal courts across the country. In addition, JTB’s weeklong Summer Law Institutes in eight cities provide programming for middle and high school students. It was Parsons’s example that inspired Williams to launch the organization. And that organization is how Washington learned about Parsons.

**Visualizing the Finish Line**

Williams told Washington about Parsons at a Just the Beginning fundraiser in October 2017. Washington felt joy when he first learned of Parsons’s affiliation with the Law School. But soon that joy was accompanied by surprise. How, as a student at the Law School himself, had he not known?

“One thing that makes it easier to survive the rigors of an elite law school is being able to imagine the finish line—which means seeing and hearing African-American success stories,” Washington said.

He decided to share Parsons’s story with his classmates.
Waters said it was also great to see professors interacting with alumni who graduated many years ago. “It was like watching a big reunion taking place,” she said. Added Osuji: “We wanted the whole school to know about Judge Parsons, a giant in our midst. We also thought it was important to focus on helping students get jobs.”

Osuji believes that Parsons, and others like Earl B. Dickerson, ’20, the Law School’s first Black graduate, for whom the Law School’s BLSA chapter is named, should be better known to all students at the Law School. (Williams has also received the Chicago Bar Association’s Earl B. Dickerson Award.)

“There’s not a formal mechanism to tell us about Dickerson and others,” Osuji said. “I heard the details about Dickerson, one of the school’s trailblazers, when Professor [William] Hubbard told us about him in our Civil Procedure II class. We were discussing Hansberry v. Lee, a case Dickerson argued and won. That was where I learned Dickerson was the school’s first Black graduate. I think, with the Law School’s help, the Parsons Dinner and other events like it will bring more stories to light.”

opportunity for students to meet mentors and alumni. “It was really neat to watch people meet each other at the cocktail hour before the dinner,” Waters said. “Judge Williams went person by person to meet students and asked them why they wanted to go to law school. She made it a point to personally engage with all the students who were there.”

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André J. Washington, ’19, and Judge Ann C. Williams

Professor Randolph Stone [left] and Dean Thomas J. Miles [right] catch up with Eric Graham, ’53, an old friend of Judge Parsons’s.
Williams’s speech at the dinner sent a message to Osuji. “Listening to her speak, I started to see how a journey from law school to the bench could work,” she said. “I want the Class of 2021 to know that we are all capable of becoming federal judges.”

Washington said it was difficult to articulate just how much he got out of organizing and attending the dinner. “Meeting Judge Parsons’s family made his legacy more real,” he said. “Judge Williams’s talk was amazing. Her support and passion for Parsons and for the Law School Dinner were monumental.”

Dave Gordon, ’98, a partner at Sidley Austin, a sponsor of the dinner, agreed that the gathering was special. “I was deeply impressed by the commitment and energy demonstrated by the talented members of BLSA in organizing this first-of-its-kind event. When a group of law students shows this kind of initiative—and follow-through—the entire Law School community benefits,” he said. “I cannot recall attending an event at the Law School that connected generations of Law School graduates more effectively. It was a profound and inspiring experience to sit at a table both with Judge Parsons’s contemporaries and current Law School students, connecting the accomplishments of trailblazers with the promise of more great things to come.”

Hattix said that while there are still obstacles for minorities in the legal profession, Parsons and Williams and others like them have made great strides. “Judge
Williams thanked Parsons for knocking down barriers, and because of him, she was able to look forward and ask “What barriers can I move?” Hattix said. “One of the reasons the dinner was created was because we want to create traditions that might help others grow.”

Waters thinks that the accomplishments of Parsons and other minorities who have graduated from the Law School can’t be emphasized enough. “The fact that Parsons was trained in these classrooms and persevered when no one else looked like him is absolutely inspiring,” she said.

She was also inspired by listening to Williams. “Judge Williams showed us there are no limits. She repeated over and over to dream big, work hard, never give up, stand up, and give back. The message to me was that whatever you’re passionate about . . . you can do that,” Waters said. “The legal profession is extremely competitive, but this should not deter us. As long as we stay connected to the work and to each other, we can achieve it.”

**Standing on the Shoulders of Giants**

Hattix said the dinner also illuminated the importance of telling the truth.

“Honoring Parsons and other legal giants who followed him helps tell the story of how Black people were foreclosed from political, academic, and social spaces,” she said. “As a country, we’ve sanitized what oppression was like in the day-to-day in Black people’s lives.”

A critical aspect of the event, she said, was that it took place in the Green Lounge, which is a “sacred space” of sorts at the Law School. “It didn’t happen in a place that was hidden. It was out in the open, in the heartbeat of the school,” she said. “The Parsons Dinner is a way to give Black students and Law School alums a way to celebrate Black graduates and judges. My hope is that the Parsons Legacy Dinner will surpass what we imagine it could be.”

Part of telling the story, Hattix believes, is to acknowledge that success, especially in the legal arena, can be difficult. “The legal profession is one of the least represented by people of color,” Hattix said. “There are realized implications to that fact. The inaccessibility of the legal system can prevent Black individuals from having the same power and sway to direct laws and policies that have real implications for people’s lives.”

Hattix said while it is important to recognize the resilience and brilliance of people who blaze new trails, it
isn’t enough to simply recognize success stories. It is also important to confront the dearth of role models. “We want to inspire students to want to be judges,” she added.

Hattix said it was powerful to see students mingling at the dinner with an important community that included Parsons’s family, faculty, alums, and many students—and it was inspiring to meet Parsons’s family. Washington agreed. “I wasn’t just reading about him in a book—the fact of him and his good works were magnified, and that was the next best thing to having actually met him,” Washington said.

Tacy Flint, ’04, a partner at Sidley, saw the dinner as a new way to enrich the Law School community.

“One of the defining features of the University of Chicago Law School is that it is a community dedicated to rigorous analysis of ideas. The students of BLSA who organized the Parsons Dinner made a huge contribution to that community,” Flint said. “By presenting the experience and example of Judge Parsons, as well as the uplifting message of Judge Williams, the event allowed those of us privileged to attend an important new opportunity to learn about and discuss the law and each of our roles in the profession.”

Hattix was particularly moved when she met Parsons’s young great-granddaughter, Grace, who wants to be a lawyer. “As Black law students, we realize that we are standing on the shoulders of those who came before us. When I met Judge Parsons’s great-granddaughter and heard she wanted to be a lawyer, I realized the generational impact Parsons had embodied in her,” Hattix said, adding, “It’s the little things that get passed along when one is allowed to be brilliant in these spaces that inspire, and they are really important.”

The Parsons Legacy Dinner will be held each year at the end of February as the culminating event for the celebration of Black History Month.

“I had the pleasure to serve on the planning committee and watch fellow 2L BLSA members create an event that celebrated the life of a man who has broken both racial and judicial barriers,” said Amiri Lampley, ’20, BLSA’s new president. “The dinner reminded students of color that, although the path is not always easy, we owe it to the ones who came before us to pave the way for the ones who will come after us. The incoming BLSA Executive Board is excited to carry the torch and looks forward to sharing Judge Parsons’s legacy with an even larger audience this year.”

Judge Ann C. Williams, now retired from the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, greets guests while then-Dean of Students Shannon Bartlett and Dean Thomas Miles look on.