

Michigan Law Review

Volume 104 | Issue 2

2005

Tribute to John Pickering

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Recommended Citation

Elaine R. Jones, *Tribute to John Pickering*, 104 MICH. L. REV. 185 (2005).

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mlr/vol104/iss2/5>

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TRIBUTE TO JOHN PICKERING

*Elaine R. Jones**

This talented, persuasive, committed lawyer-leader, John Pickering, had several abiding personal and professional interests, two of which enhanced my life directly, and most of which enhanced my life indirectly. The first was the great personal interest he took in lawyers younger than himself, and the second was his passion about civil rights and combating the effects of racial discrimination.

Direct enhancement number one: As of 1987, no African-American had ever served on the Board of Governors of the American Bar Association. Cecil Poole, the African-American jurist who served on the Ninth Circuit for many years, had tried years earlier to become a member of the Board of Governors. He was not successful. The difference between Judge Poole and me was that I had John Pickering as my advocate and lobbyist within the American Bar Association. He may not have been president, but he was where the power was.

Within the inner sanctum of Byzantine ABA politics, John knew his way around. Once the Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities decided in 1987 that they would offer my name to the ABA Nominating Committee, I had three more hurdles. I had the Nominating Committee to get through, the Board of Governors, and the House of Delegates.

John Pickering was the D.C. delegate to the House of Delegates, and he was therefore a member of the Nominating Committee. And so he carried my water. When I got the nod from the Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities, I had no idea how I would become a member of the Board of Governors. But once it got in John's hands, I did not have to fully understand how it happened. All I knew was that he announced to me, "Elaine, you will be the first African-American on the Board of Governors." And so it was.

John's direct enhancement number two was that he understood that those of us who work in the nonprofit world always need money. Whether we engage in raising funds for our nonprofit institutions, or succeed in finding necessary funds to supplement our meager salaries, John understood the need. He was a generous supporter of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

Personally, however, in 1994, I was notified that I had been awarded the Kutak-Dodds Prize from the National Legal Aid and Defender Association. Established in 1989, the award honors the equal justice advocate who, through the practice of law, has contributed in a significant way to the enhancement of the human dignity and quality of life of those persons unable to afford legal representation.

* Former Director-Counsel and President of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

John had worked with the National Legal Aid and Defender organization, writing amicus briefs and working through the cases. Clint Lyon and Esther Lardent responded to John's nomination of me for the Kutak-Dodds award, a nomination I knew nothing about.

We understand that plaques and keys to the city and commemorations and medallions are all quite wonderful. But we also understand the sentiment expressed by the great fighter, Joe Louis: "I don't like money, actually, but it quiets my nerves."

"Well?" John remarked, with a smile, when I received the award. "Elaine, you got the big Kahuna," and that I did. Thank you, John, very much.

I shall miss him, I shall miss him, I shall miss him. The shared taxi rides, our talks, the conversations by phone, over dinner, or standing together in receptions, or caucusing on the floor of the House of Delegates—and every year during the nearly fifteen years he and Mrs. Wright were married, he introduced us every time we met. And so I welcomed that.

Emerson tells us (I paraphrase—oh, the nerve to paraphrase Emerson!): "See how the masses of men and women worry themselves into nameless graves while here and there a great unselfish soul forgets himself into immortality." John's was a generous, giving, caring life, well-lived. He is now immortal.