

Fellowship/Scholarship

John A. Payton was the sixth president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF), the nation's preeminent civil rights and racial justice law firm. Prior to joining LDF, John was a partner of Wilmer Cutler Pickering LLP and, later, the combined Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP (WilmerHale) for more than ten years. A brilliant litigator, John dedicated his life to justice, equality and opportunity until he died suddenly on March 22, 2012 after a brief illness. Upon his passing, President Barack Obama remembered John as a “legend” and “a true champion of equality,” whose “courage and fierce opposition to discrimination in all its forms” would never be forgotten.

WilmerHale and LDF honor John's enduring legacy through the creation of the [John A. Payton Summer Associate Fellowship](#), which provides two summer associates in WilmerHale's Boston, New York or Washington DC offices with the opportunity to spend a minimum of seven weeks at the firm and five weeks in LDF's New York or DC office.

Prior to joining LDF and guiding the organization to resounding legal victories, John spent the bulk of his career in private practice in WilmerHale's DC office, where he was an advocate for pro bono service. John demonstrated his signature brilliance when he served as lead counsel for the University of Michigan, defending its affirmative action policy, in *Gratz v. Bollinger*. John handled this extraordinarily important and high-profile case in the trial court, court of appeals and in his argument before

the US Supreme Court. The Court's decision in the landmark companion case, *Grutter v. Bollinger*—upholding race-conscious admissions in higher education—represented the vindication of the strategy that John devised and implemented across more than six years litigating *Gratz* to support the educational benefits of diversity.

Read about [WilmerHale's first Payton Fellow](#), Lake Concetta Coreth.