
WilmerHale and NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) Partner to Honor the Late John A. Payton

JUNE 12, 2014

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, Mr. Payton was a Partner at Wilmer Cutler Pickering LLP and, later, Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP (WilmerHale) for a combined total of 27 years. A brilliant litigator, Mr. Payton 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 Mr. Payton 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 Mr. Payton's enduring legacy through the creation of the John A. Payton Summer Associate Fellowship, which will provide one summer associate in WilmerHale's Washington DC office the opportunity to spend half of their summer at LDF in New York City.

"Establishing the Fellowship was a way for WilmerHale to honor John, continue his enduring legacy and underscore to young lawyers the firm's continuing commitment to advocating for civil rights social justice issues," said WilmerHale Co-Managing Partner [Susan Murley](#).

Prior to joining LDF and guiding the organization to resounding legal victories, Mr. Payton spent the bulk of his career in private practice in WilmerHale's Washington DC office, where he was an advocate for pro bono service. Mr. Payton demonstrated his signature brilliance when he served as lead counsel for the University of Michigan, defending its affirmative action policy, in *Gratz v. Bollinger*. Mr. Payton 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 Mr. Payton devised and implemented over more than six years litigating *Gratz* to support the educational benefits of diversity.

"John brought his brilliant intellect and painstaking preparation to all of his work, while maintaining an infectious optimism and confidence that made good things not simply possible, but probable. In so doing, John personified the best of civil rights lawyering. We honor John by providing the means for young lawyers to engage in the hands-on work of forging 'a more perfect union' using the tools of

appellate advocacy that John so loved and that he so wholly mastered," said Sherrilyn Ifill, LDF President and Director-Counsel.

"I am thrilled that WilmerHale and LDF, the two institutions to which John devoted the bulk of his career, have chosen to honor his legacy by training future lawyers to walk in his footsteps," said Gay McDougall, wife of the late Mr. Payton.