

## **Oral History of Ronald C. Jessamy, Sr.**

### **Second Interview April 30, 2018**

This interview is being conducted on behalf of the Oral History Project of The Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit. The interviewer is Pleasant Brodnax, and the interviewee is Ronald C. Jessamy, Sr.. The interview took place in Mr. Jessamy's office on Monday, April 30, 2018. This is the second interview being conducted by Pleasant Brodnax.

MR. BRODNAX: Mr. Jessamy, good morning. I know that you have participated in a number of programs at the federal courthouse, and not just for matters related to your cases, but also on a volunteer basis with respect to certain groups. Could we talk about some of those. Let's begin with committees you may have been appointed to by the federal judges there.

MR. JESSAMY: Good morning, Mr. Brodnax. I've maintained a presence in the federal courthouse for matters other than just trying cases. I at one point had been selected for Merit Selection Panel of the reappointment of Magistrate Judge Alan Kay. In fact, I chaired that panel, and that was at the time that Judge Norma Holloway Johnson was the Chief Judge of that court. I got appointed by judges of the court to the Non-appropriated Funds Committee. The person who was spearheading that was a now-retired judge by the name of Henry Kennedy. The Non-appropriated Funds Committee would make recommendations to the Court for certain organizations and entities who made application to receive funds that ---- of the court but were not appropriated by any of the governing bodies. Then I go to the Courthouse for a number of the programs that are held

there. There are often programs held on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor in the Ceremonial Courtroom. Following that, there are receptions by various groups and organizations that I participate in. One most notably is the Council for Court Excellence, which has held its annual and semi-annual meetings in the Ceremonial Courtroom over a number of years. I mentioned the receptions in the annex of the federal courthouse. The annex is named after a giant of an individual by the name of Judge Bryant. I went there when they dedicated it. It was a source of great, great, great pride. He had so many individuals come out and pay homage to him and his memory. It was a feeling that I can't really describe.

MR. BRODNAX: In addition to being the chief judge of the D.C. U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia for a number of years, Judge Bryant also has been the recipient of a coveted award of a very important organization here in Washington, D.C., the Washington Bar Association. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

MR. JESSAMY: I don't know why you ask that question because we're going to end this transcription today, but yes, I'm very close to the Washington Bar Association. Back in 1976, the Washington Bar Association established what is called the Charles Hamilton Houston Medallion of Merit. Charles Hamilton Houston was one of the founders of the Washington Bar Association, and he was also the architect of destroying Jim Crow in the court through the use of the courts. Judge Bryant's background training and professional career was such that in 1977 he was awarded this very,

very coveted medallion, and I would say that almost all of the individuals, if not all of the individuals, have been known to have made their mark in the area of civil rights, and Judge Bryant certainly did that during the course of his practice in law, and he assured that the rights of individuals who appeared before him in the federal courthouse were honored, observed, and not \_\_\_\_\_.

MR. BRODNAX: I understand it that among the members of the Washington Bar Association, Charles Hamilton Houston Medallion awardees are several members of the Federal Judiciary here in the District of Columbia. Could you tell us who some of them are?

MR. JESSAMY: I can, but before we get to the Federal Judiciary in Washington, D.C., there are several Supreme Court Justices who have received the coveted Charles Hamilton Houston Medallion of Merit from the Washington Bar Association, including the likes of the Honorable Thurgood Marshall, the Honorable William J. Brennan, Jr., and the Honorable Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Justice Ginsburg received her award in 2015. Justice Marshall received his award in 1976, and Justice Brennan received his award in 1987. Getting back to the D.C. Circuit, we have the award going to the Honorable Spottswood Robinson, who also received it in 1976 at the time that Thurgood Marshall and several other individuals received it. At the District Court level, we have the Honorable Joseph Waddy. We have the Honorable Aubrey Robinson, we have the Honorable John Garrett Penn, Norma Holloway Johnson, and most recently, we had the Honorable

Emmett G. Sullivan. So as you can see, there exists quite an array of individuals who have received this award. We take particular honor in recognizing these individuals, and we are happy that they accept because we want to hold them out, make them a part of the Washington Bar Association's history. Every individual that we had voted to receive the Charles Hamilton Houston Medallion of Merit from our organization has accepted. For that, we are grateful.

MR. BRODNAX: We have talked about the award that has been given by the Washington Bar Association. Let's talk a little bit about the Washington Bar Association and its inception and founding. Could you talk to us a little bit about how the Washington Bar Association came to be in existence?

MR. JESSAMY: This goes back quite a few years. The Washington Bar Association was established in 1925, but prior to the Washington Bar Association, there were other groups of African American lawyers who had come together to associate themselves for their own benefit, for their own protection, and for the advancement and advocacy for the community. That was because they were not permitted to join the Voluntary white bar associations. The Washington Bar Association was preceded by an organization called the Colored Bar Association, and apparently there was some sort of a split of mindset of individuals, and one of the founders, of course, was Charles Hamilton Houston, and who the medallion is named after. Charles Hamilton Houston, for those who don't know, had been credited for being the man who killed Jim Crow. That is, he had drafted the strategy of

pursuing litigation that would eventually lead to the dismantling of recognized de jure, I guess, of segregation in the field of education. It was initially thought that *Plessy v. Ferguson* that was decided in the 1890s was going to be the law that forever stood. Charles Hamilton Houston proved that wrong.

The interesting thing about Charles Houston is that he did not live long enough to see the Supreme Court rule against legalized segregation. However, the star pupil at the Howard Law School was a gentleman named Thurgood Marshall. Thurgood Marshall argued that case in the Supreme Court, which eventually led to the decision in 1954 that outlawed segregation. That decision set the groundwork for the dismantling of segregation in other areas – transportation, housing, and the like. So, when we honor people with this Charles Hamilton Houston Medallion of Merit, the Washington Bar Association is saying thank you, well done. We know we still have a lot of work to do, but we have great examples from whom we have learned and will continue to try to walk in their footsteps.

MR. BRODNAX: When did you first become involved with the Washington Bar Association?

MR. JESSAMY: I would say that was probably in the mid-1970s. I do recall attending every Law Day banquet from 1979 until the present time. I remember attending most Ollie May Cooper Award programs that began in 1979, and that is still a program that is carried on this very day.

MR. BRODNAX: Speaking of Ollie May Cooper, could you tell us who Ollie May Cooper is.

MR. JESSAMY: Ollie May Cooper was a lady who worked at the Howard University Law School. Ollie May Cooper was a lawyer herself. Ollie May Cooper is credited with creating the first female law practice, law firm, in the District of Columbia with another woman. But while she worked at Howard throughout the deanships of a number of individuals, she was known for looking out for the interests of those students. She was very generous of her own \_\_\_\_\_ in helping students make tuition and fee payments. She was the glue, from what I understand, that kind of held that law school together for a number of years.

MR. BRODNAX: The Washington Bar Association inaugurated a program called the Ollie May Cooper Award Program.

MR. JESSAMY: Yes. That was done under the late Jay Clay Smith, Jr., who eventually became President of the Washington Bar Association. He wanted to recognize Ollie May Cooper for her efforts, and as I indicated, or should have indicated, that the first award of the Ollie May Cooper Award was given by the Washington Bar Association in 1979.

MR. BRODNAX: Do you have a particularly interesting story that you experienced around that time with respect to Ollie May Cooper?

MR. JESSAMY: Oh yes. Very much so.

MR. BRODNAX: Could you tell us about that?

MR. JESSAMY: The president of the Washington Bar Association at the time was Jay Clay Smith. He gave me an assignment. He asked me to go to the 1400 block of R Street here in the District of Columbia and pick up Ms. Cooper and to escort her to the program, the very first Ollie May Cooper program, and I took quite delight in receiving that assignment from Jay Clay Smith. It's what I sometimes call my own private window on history. Here I am driving Ms. Cooper to a program, and there's an award named after her. When I learned of her generosity and all the work that she had done at the Howard University Law School, I was literally in awe. She holds a very special place in my heart. Not because I happened to have received an Ollie May Cooper Award at one time, but because of her devotion and dedication to those students at the Howard University Law School, because of her devotion and dedication to the Deans that she had worked for at the Law School, and to the fact that she was a pioneering individual in her own right when she and a law partner established a practice of law in the District of Columbia.

MR. BRODNAX: You mentioned that you have received the Ollie May Cooper Award. What year was it that you received it?

MR. JESSAMY: If memory serves me correctly, it was probably 2013. I was quite honored. In fact, I did not make it to the meeting in which the nominations were received for individuals who received the award. The president of the Washington Bar Association at the time was a lawyer by the name of Billy Martin, and somebody, I don't know who, put my name

in for nomination, and I do recall Mr. Martin saying at the program, well that's what you get for missing a meeting. Anyway, I was quite honored, and I have that award prominently displayed on my credenza in my office.

MR. BRODNAX: Prior to receiving the award, Ron, you had actually served as the president of the Washington Bar Association. Was it from 2008 to 2010?

MR. JESSAMY: Yes. Those two bar years, which go usually from September through June. That was a very interesting time in my professional career, and I took that responsibility as president very seriously. The Washington Bar Association was doing great things at that time. We had established a Judicial Council Division which involves the participation of members of the Judiciary in the District of Columbia, as well as members of the Administrative Law Judges here in the District of Columbia, and they are quite vibrant. They put on quite a few symposiums dealing with various issues, and those symposiums are very well-attended. We get tremendous support from the bench and from the Administrative Judges. There is a Young Lawyers division. Those young lawyers are quite something to behold. They get it done, if I can be a bit colloquial. They make themselves available to do many, many things in the community. In fact, just this past weekend they put on a health fair. Unfortunately I did not attend, but I've seen pictures and read some comments about how well it was.

MR. BRODNAX: One thing I forgot to ask you about as we were talking about the Law Day program. We are now in April of 2018, and in a few days, the Washington Bar Association will have another Law Day program. Is that correct?

MR. JESSAMY: That is correct.

MR. BRODNAX: Who will be the recipients of the Charles Hamilton Houston Award of Merit at the upcoming program?

MR. JESSAMY: There will be two recipients this year. One is Roger L. Gregory, who was a chief judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit. The other recipient will be a lady by the name of Grace Speights. She is a global leader in the law firm Morgan Lewis.

MR. BRODNAX: You mentioned Chief Judge Gregory. Did Chief Judge Gregory also participate in the ABA program that you discussed earlier?

MR. JESSAMY: Yes. If I may, I'll call him Roger because he and I became good friends through that program. Roger was a principal in a law firm in Richmond, Virginia, called Wilder & Gregory. Wilder is the former Governor of Virginia, and he is also a recipient of the Charles Hamilton Houston Medallion of Merit awarded by the Washington Bar Association. I recall going to Judge Gregory's investiture on becoming a judge on the Fourth Circuit. Two things I remember about that. One is that Governor Wilder was one of the individuals who delivered remarks, and in his remarks, Governor Wilder revealed the fact that all the time that he and Roger had been law partners, they never had a written partnership agreement between

them. I said, "Wow." That is trust. That is integrity. That is the individual that I became friends with by the name of Roger L. Gregory.

MR. BRODNAX: You have been a long-time participant and contributor to the Washington Bar Association. You've been involved with the Association as early as 1976. You served as the President of the Washington Bar Association from 2008 to 2010. You received the Ollie May Cooper Award from the Washington Bar Association in 2013. Here we are in 2018, and I think it's fair to say that you could be considered an elder statesman of the Washington Bar. In fact, you are also a member of the Washington Bar Association's Hall of Fame. Could you tell us a little about that?

MR. JESSAMY: Yes. I am somewhat involved, even at my old age, with a number of activities of the Washington Bar Association. You asked about the Hall of Fame. The Washington Bar Association has what is known as its own hall of fame to recognize individuals who have made substantial contributions to the community and to the Washington Bar Association. So I am pleased and proud to have joined the ranks of a number of individuals who have also been inducted into our Hall of Fame. Talking about being an elder statesman, I remembered the time when I would go to meetings and I was one of the youngest persons around the table. Now I go to meetings, and I'm one of the oldest persons around the table. I have no problem whatsoever with being one of the older persons or, if we want to use the term that you use, elder statesmen.

MR. BRODNAX: One of the benefits of having served in an organization for such a long period of time in so many capacities and being recognized as a substantial contributor to an organization, you have a long-term view of things, Ron. How do you see the Washington Bar Association today and in the future?

MR. JESSAMY: I see the Washington Bar Association as continuing its aggressive, vibrant advocacy on behalf of the community it represents. I see the Washington Bar Association actually in this day and time more visible in the community. By way of example, just last year, the Washington Bar Association received the D.C. Bar's Voluntary Bar Association of the Year Award. That was the award for the Bar Association that the D.C. Bar had given out. Last year, the Washington Bar Association received the designation of Affiliate of the Year by the National Bar Association. So by those standards, the Washington Bar Association is on the move. The Judicial Council Division continues its efforts in bringing programs to the membership and to the community at large. The Young Lawyers Division is active probably several times a month doing things in the community, putting on programs that benefit the community. There is a Law Students Division of the Washington Bar Association, and the Law Students Division is designed to help students focus on advocacy for the community, help focus on their potential career paths, and that has been growing, and there have been participants from several additional law schools when it first got started. So by and large, I am quite optimistic about the future and outlook of what the Washington Bar Association will

be doing in its role as an advocate for the community, in its role as an advocate for the by and large African American judges and attorneys in the District of Columbia.

MR. BRODNAX: I believe you have also served an organization called the Council for Court Excellence for a number of years. Could you tell us about your experience with that Council?

MR. JESSAMY: I have been associated with the Council for Court Excellence since at least 1989. The Council for Court Excellence is an organization consisting of attorneys, community members, judges, all for the improvement of matters at the courts. For instance, the Council for Court Excellence initiated the discussion papers that ended up in becoming a policy at the D.C. Superior Court called One Day, One Trial. That situation where when you call for jury service, if you do not get picked for trial on a date that you were down there, your jury service ends at the end of that day until, of course, the next time you call which is approximately two years later.

MR. BRODNAX: Before that, what was the policy?

MR. JESSAMY: The policy was you would get called for jury duty, you would have to stay on jury duty, that is, come to the court daily for I think I recall it was at least a two-week period of time, and you'd sit around a jury lounge, get called up from time to time to go to the various courtrooms. If you weren't picked, you got back to the jury lounge. But anyway, that is one of the major improvements in the judiciary during the years that I have been part of the Council for Court Excellence.

The Council also engages in jury education. The Council also has produced now two films that are played in the jury lounge to give jurors a sample of what to expect when they go to a courtroom. When I say several films, the second one has been update of the first one. There are a number of publications that the Council for Court Excellence has put out over the years. One that I remember most is the guide to what to expect in probate proceedings, and it's something that's pretty user friendly, and it's very educational. So they do a lot of policy analysis for various organizations and D.C. City Council as it relates to matters that have a bearing on the courts.

MR. BRODNAX: I think there was a period of time when you were on the Council for Court Excellence that you also served on the committee that you had mentioned earlier of the Non-Appropriated Funds Committee. I think you said you worked with Judge Kennedy on that committee. Was there an interesting occurrence when you were serving on both of those committees at the same time?

MR. JESSAMY: The Non-Appropriated Funds Committee at that time, and I don't know if that committee still exists, used funds that were accumulated by the court to make grants to community-based organizations, and it just so happens that one of the instances, the Council for Court Excellence had a request for a grant pending, so obviously being on the Council and being on the Non-Appropriated Funds Committee, I felt that it would obviously be a conflict for me to participate in awarding my own organization a grant, so

I recused myself and let other members of the committee make the decision. As it turned out, the Council for Court Excellence did receive the grant that it applied for, and as I think back on this thing now, the conflict would have been more egregious because I may have been on the executive committee of the Council for Court Excellence at that time.

MR. BRODNAX: Was there also a period of time in the mid-1980s that you became involved on a volunteer basis with the Greater Southeast Hospital?

MR. JESSAMY: Yes. The Greater Southeast Community Hospital at that time was a 400-bed hospital in the Southeast quadrant of the District of Columbia. Prior to that time, a lot of people knew the hospital as Cafritz Memorial Hospital, but it did have a name change. At the time I became involved with the hospital, I took somewhat of a hiatus from participating in the Washington Bar Association because I tell you that hospital work, it was volunteer, but it seemed like a full-time job. I remember meetings at 7:30 in the morning. I remember meetings at night that went beyond 9:00. But there was a lot to be done. At that time, the hospital was actually one of the few hospitals in the District of Columbia that was making money. There had been structural changes in the corporate makeup of the hospital and its parent company and the like, but that came. The hospital isn't there anymore. Well, the hospital is there, but it's not known as the Greater Southeast Hospital, and it has been a struggling enterprise in recent years for people who read the local newspapers would know that. We were a Trauma One Center at the time that I was on the board. In fact,

the hospital made money those years, which I think I mentioned, while most hospitals in D.C. were not.

MR. BRODNAX: You've also been involved in an organization called the D.C. Martin Luther King Support Group. Could you discuss your involvement with that organization?

MR. JESSAMY: By all means. The Martin Luther King, Jr. D.C. Support Group is an organization that has been chartered by the Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta, Georgia. What that group does is put on programs to raise money to support the King Center in Atlanta. We provide scholarships annually. We have a luncheon annually on Dr. King's birthday. For about 25 years, I was Chairman of that group. One other thing that I failed to mention is that every April, around April 4, the date that Dr. King was assassinated, we put on a prayer breakfast, and that is something that is still occurring in this year, 2018. I actually enjoyed my work in that entity.

I had unfortunately not been able to come to the March on Washington when Dr. King gave his now-highly exalted, famous speech of "I Have A Dream," but I've always been interested in civil rights, civil rights organizations, civil rights litigation. So for me, it was a very comfortable fit. Even though I don't have as much involvement with that group now, at least for the 25 years that I chaired that organization, I had been pretty active.

MR. BRODNAX: There's also an organization named the Washington, D.C. Hall of Fame Society that you've been involved with. Could you tell us what that is, what that organization does, and your involvement.

MR. JESSAMY: That is an organization that had been formed in the District of Columbia in 2000 to honor and recognize the contributions of the many citizens who have made significant contributions and had an impact on life here in the city. We are gearing up for the 2020 20<sup>th</sup> reunion, and we have been told that we can have the names of the inductees put in a public space much like the Hall of Fame out in Los Angeles for actors. This one will be for people who have made contributions to the District of Columbia. And by way of example, some of the inductees we have at least two inductees in the category of law who had been members of the United States District Court bench here in the District of Columbia. One, of course, is Judge William B. Bryant. The other is Judge Norma Holloway Johnson. The categories in which the people are inducted into the Hall of Fame include business, cultural arts, communications, civic and community development, education, health, law, religion, science and technology, politics and government, sports. There's also a national award for which an individual does not have to be a resident of the District of Columbia but has attributed significantly to the quality of life in the District of Columbia. There is what is known as a Lifetime Achievement Award, and then there is a regional award. That award goes to individuals who live in the Washington region but do not reside in the District of Columbia.

There's something I need to correct. When I mentioned the title of the category for awards, I had mentioned in one instance what I had inadvertently said was a Lifetime Achievement award. I should have said Lifetime Legacy award. That award was given out only twice, and one was to a lady with whom I had worked closely with for about twenty years prior to her death, and that is Dr. Dorothy Irene Height.

MR. BRODNAX: When you referred to the Lifetime Legacy award only being given out twice, twice in what period of time?

MR. JESSAMY: Twice in the last eighteen years.

MR. BRODNAX: When you tell us that you have done some work with Dr. Height, could you expound upon your experience with Dr. Height?

MR. JESSAMY: We could be here for a day or two or more, but it was a wonderful experience working with Dr. Height, and an organization which she led was the National Council of Negro Women in the District of Columbia. Some of the more prominent matters that come to mind is when she was out exploring property to purchase as the area headquarters for the National Council of Negro Women, she related a story about a realtor had taken her around and shown her some properties, and she respectfully indicated that she wasn't quite interested in a property he showed her, and it turns out the property was on a side street, and the realtor said to her, "Well what's wrong with being on a side street?" Reportedly, Dr. Height said, "Well, do we look like side street people?" She had in mind that the founder of the National Council of Negro Women, Mary McLeod

Bethune, had said that she would like her people to have a prominent place in the nation's capital. The prominent place that Dr. Height had found for the National Council of Negro Women turns out to be on Pennsylvania Avenue, Northwest. It is midway between the White House and the Capitol. Dr. Height had stated on a number of occasions, or at least posed the question, is this a prominent location in the nation's capital? The answer has to be it is.

MR. BRODNAX: Did you have any involvement in the purchase of the property located on Pennsylvania Avenue for the National Council of Negro Women?

MR. JESSAMY: Yes indeed. My firm served as counsel during the negotiations of the contract. My firm also was the location where the settlement took place. We were not the settlement attorneys, but the settlement people came to our building, to my office, to our conference room. The firm at the time was named Jessamy, Forte, Ogletree & Botts, and the deal was closed in my office. I take particular pride in it for several reasons. One, I believe in the mission of the National Council of Negro Women. I personally like and admire Dr. Height to the utmost degree, and I am just so proud that I had the opportunity to participate in a venture of that nature and magnitude.

MR. BRODNAX: To borrow your phrase when you were talking about your experience with Ms. Ollie May Cooper, you referred to your experience as your own little private window on history. Are there other experiences with Dr. Height

that you can share with us that might be considered your own little private window on history?

MR. JESSAMY: By all means. How much time do you have? Without being facetious, during the years that I've worked with Dr. Height, I travelled with her to various locations. I do recall one time before the property was purchased on Pennsylvania Avenue, Dr. Height, some of her staff members and myself traveled to North Carolina to the home of Dr. Maya Angelou who was very instrumental in trying to raise the funds for the National Council of Negro Women to buy the property. That was quite an experience. We sat in the kitchen of Dr. Angelou's house, and there was much talking going on, and much strategy being developed at times, and I'm saying I'm sitting here with these two giants of history, one at one head of the table, the other at the other end of the table. It was quite a large table, by the way, but there was room in the kitchen for staff to sit. There may not have been room for them to sit at the table, but there was room for them to sit. I will always treasure that experience.

There was another time I traveled with Dr. Height to Fredericksburg, Virginia, to the home of the general counsel of the National Council of Negro Women. The general counsel is a member of the executive committee of the National Council of Negro Women. The person we went to visit was a good friend of Dr. Height's whose name is Dovey Roundtree. Dovey Roundtree is quite a known figure in old Washington, I'll say. She had a law firm, and she had a number of cases

which had made the news. At the time that Dr. Height and I were visiting her, Ms. Roundtree must have been in her 80s. She's 100-and-some-odd years now. She's still alive and lives in a nursing home in North Carolina. She had a book published. She's legally blind at this time, but I understand that she is probably still in her right mind, to borrow a phrase from Dr. Height.

I've traveled to Dr. Height to other places. I know we went to a funeral in Detroit, Michigan, of a former executive of General Motors who was very instrumental in fundraising to raise the money to buy the building on Pennsylvania Avenue. So it was quite a delight.

MR. BRODNAX: You mentioned attorney Dovey Roundtree, and her history as an attorney here in D.C. intersects with one of the members of the District Court, Judge Joyce Hens Green.

MR. JESSAMY: Yes. As it has been recorded in oath, Ms. Roundtree's biography, and through other discussions that I've heard, Judge Joyce Hens Green was the sponsor of Ms. Roundtree to become a member of the Women's Bar Association here in the District of Columbia. Because Ms. Roundtree was of color, she was not allowed to be a member of the Women's Bar Association. Well, there was an effort back probably in the 1950s when Judge Joyce Hens Green, who also is a favorite person of mine, in fact, I used to have breakfast almost every morning with Judge Green and her husband Sam. Before he died while Judge Green was on the bench, her husband had a law practice in a building where the café was where we

would have breakfast. I'd always make a comment about when Judge Green would go up and get the coffee pot and fill our coffee cups with coffee, I said, "Only in America could a welfare kid like me have service by a United States District Court Judge." I actually treasure that relationship between myself and Judge Green and her husband. She is quite a phenomenal individual.