

Philadelphia Bar Foundation Access to Justice Awards Program

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I became a lawyer because of Wendell Grimke Freeland.

In the 1940's, Wendell was a Tuskegee Airman who went on to become the second black student to graduate from the University of Maryland School of Law.

In the 1950's, he sued to desegregate the public swimming pools in Pittsburgh.

In the 1960's, he represented people and groups in landlord/tenant cases, landmark civil rights cases, employment cases – often for nothing more than the honor of helping another person facing potentially devastating circumstances who couldn't pay a fee, or who sometimes paid maybe a couple of bucks here and there. Wendell's wealth could not be measured in dollars.

In the 1970's, he was instrumental in founding Neighborhood Legal Services of Pittsburgh. He went on to become the Chair of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington, and Senior Vice President of the National Urban League.

Wendell Freeland was my mentor from the time I was 7 or 8 years old. He often referred to his law degree as “a ticket to a civil rights fight.” I learned about justice and equality at the knees of a foot soldier in the movement.

Many of you have had mentors or teachers who introduced you to the very real truth that our collective humanity is diminished when any group is denied rights granted to others. But this is especially true when the poor, the powerless and the penniless are systematically denied the simple justice we often presume, or just take for granted.

The theme for this evening, “Access to Justice”, is easy to support. But it's hard to accomplish. I believe the Equal Justice Center of Philadelphia is the single most important endeavor ever undertaken toward doing so. Behind the audacious plan and the exquisite design is nothing less than a solemn commitment to accomplish something profound: the reconciliation of lofty promises on long-faded pieces of parchment with the complex economic and social realities of urban America today.

We live in an era when the problem of access to courts for indigent persons is devastating not only to our promise of equal justice under law, but to the individuals affected, their families and their communities. Until we see that their communities are our communities; that their families are our families; and that their rights are our rights, that sacred promise will remain unfulfilled. But the very idea of the Equal Justice Center is premised upon that vision. Its very purpose is to offer a comprehensive, full-service means to bridge the gap between the haves and the have nots in our system of justice.

As Jessica Hilburn-Holmes has written, “80% of Philadelphians facing economic hardship are navigating high-stakes legal situations without a lawyer.” Now, we know that when people who can’t afford a lawyer show up in court to take on a custody matter, an eviction notice, a benefits issue (or any other potentially life-altering dispute) representing themselves, they suffer.

These cases typically involve fundamental human needs. But there’s a lot involved in vindicating individual rights to ensure that these needs are met.

A person without legal guidance often doesn’t know what issues to raise, how to raise them, what motions to file, what witnesses to call, what relief they’re entitled to – or even what court to go to. And they might never get over these hurdles, despite the fact that they might be entirely deserving of relief. And this, in turn, has severe economic consequences.

When an indigent person is evicted from public housing, that person and his or her family will need even greater public assistance. The same is true when someone is denied housing they might otherwise have been entitled to, or benefits they might otherwise have received.

When a person is wrongly dismissed from their employment but cannot afford a lawyer, the likelihood that they will prevail against an employer with a highly skilled, experienced employment lawyer is almost nil. And this, too, increases the costs to society in the form of unemployment benefits, housing issues and general sustenance needs. And when we add the impact unemployment, poverty and homelessness have on crime rates in our communities, it’s not hard to see that a lack of access to the courts, and in particular to effective legal representation, ultimately affects us all.

The Equal Justice Center will provide the means to address all of this. And that’s important, because it not only enhances our capacity to live up to our most fundamental values; it also allows us to improve the overall health and well-being of our most underserved communities. And when we do that, we are improving ourselves and our nation.

We are on a mission for justice. I ask that you support this cause. I ask that you support the legal and social organizations that will work together in a cohesive way to provide a full array of services to individuals and families who need them the most – much as a large law firm does on behalf of its corporate clients. Those who have the least are just as entitled to top-shelf justice as the most privileged among us.

And I ask that you ask yourselves, “What have I done with the gifts I’ve been given to advance the cause of justice for those most in need?” That question of compassion is as old as Scripture (Micha, Chapter 6, Verse 8: “What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”), and as current as our response to the family put out on the street yesterday because they didn’t have the means to fight an unjust eviction.

The Equal Justice Center will provide 14 different versions of the Wendell Freeland’s of our profession to fight for that family and provide the guidance and assistance it needs to rise, and to stay risen.

One of my heroes, Muhammad Ali, is credited with the shortest poem in the history of the English language: “Me, We”. I am nothing – we are nothing, without each other. We stand on

each other's shoulders. But my friends, we are truly nothing without a meaningful connection to those who have been left behind. That's what really defines who we are.

The nation's promise was written here in Philadelphia 243 years ago. Let's fulfill it anew right here today. And let's keep doing so until victory over poverty and racism and economic violence, and all the ills that plague our effort toward full equality and justice, is won.