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New UF Law interactive display, online timeline honors struggle for equality



(Photo by Nicole Safker)

By Roberta O. Roberts
Student writer

"The Legacy of Virgil D. Hawkins: The Struggle for Equality at the University of Florida," an innovative multi-media exhibit in the lobby of the Lawton Chiles Legal Information Center, was unveiled Sept. 2 at a reception during UF's Black Alumni weekend. Speakers included UF Law Dean Robert Jerry; Chief Judge of the Northern District of Florida Stephan P. Mickle, the first African-American to earn an undergraduate degree from UF (BA 65, M.Ed 66, JD 70); and W. George Allen (JD 62), the first African-American to graduate from UF Law. The viewing had about 75 to 80 attendees, ranging from distinguished alumni to

professors from the law school and main campus to current UF Law and graduate students and community members.

Allen said that the interactive exhibit was a "testament" to Hawkins' "legacy, courage and tenacity" during the "protracted and arduous process" that he had to endure to achieve justice for ethnic minorities in Florida. Allen also said that it was "fitting, proper and fair to have the monument at Levin (College of Law)."

In 1958, after nine years of battle in the Florida and United States Supreme courts Virgil D. Hawkins withdrew his application to the University of Florida College of Law in exchange for UF desegregating all of its graduate and professional schools. In 1989, Gov. Bob Martinez signed a bill into law naming UF Law's civil clinics as the Virgil Darnell Hawkins Civil Legal Clinics. And in 2001, Hawkins was awarded UF's first posthumous honorary degree in its 150-year history.

The exhibit showcases a physical timeline, an accompanying virtual timeline in a touch screen display, and a panel explaining the integration of education in America in the context of UF Law. An accompanying [website](#) is linked off the UF Law History page.

UF Law Professor Katheryn Russell-Brown, director of the UF Center for the Study of Race and Race Relations, said the exhibit serves to broaden the college of law's legal education.

"The Hawkins exhibit is an important part of the law school curriculum — legal study includes not just the black letter law but also the context in which the law operates. The exhibit provides some of UF's painful racial back story," Russell-Brown said. "Hawkins' case, a meld of race, law, politics, and history truly reflects the law in action. It represents an important part of UF history that our students should know."

In his address, Dean Jerry said that we all stand on the shoulders of Virgil D. Hawkins and on the shoulders of other heroes and "sheroes" in the movement for desegregation.

Brittany O'Neil, a 3L UF Law Moot Court member, also touched on the theme of standing on the shoulders of giants. Because of sacrifices made by African-American students and advocates before her, "when my alarm goes off and I wake up at 5, 6 a.m. for class," she said to the audience, "I know that's the least of my struggles."

Miaya McCray (2L), president of UF Law's Black Law Student Association, said she was proud to see the organization's efforts to create such a monument come to fruition.

"I'm ecstatic," McCray said. "Several members worked really hard with the committee to get this up so it is a great pride to have it up and running."

According to McCray, this exhibit helps all those who look at it to "remember that there was a struggle and that we can't become too complacent," she said. "It is a reminder to go forward so that we don't repeat history."

Dean Robert Jerry formed a task force headed by Communications Director Debra Amirin to create the exhibit in response to a request from UF Law student Vanessa Goodwin, a member of the Black Law Students Association, to upgrade a simpler, aging display in honor of Hawkins. Other task force members included Associate Deans Rachel Inman and Deb Staats, CSRRR Assistant Director Melissa Bamba, BLSA member Brittany O'Neil, Law Librarian Elizabeth Outler and Technology Services Director Mark Robinson. Project manager Rick Goldstein, associate director of communications, worked with photographer Nicole Safker (3L) and Web Editor David Tintner (4JM) to design the wall, provide content and create the display, with assistance from Facilities Manager Robert Horn, Robinson and Help Desk Manager Brian Coffey.