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June 2, 2013

## Dinner June 20 to celebrate Frank Cleckley's career

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Charleston area lawyers plan to celebrate the career of law professor and former state Supreme Court Justice Frank Cleckley, the first black tenured professor at West Virginia University, at a dinner June 20.

Cleckley, who retired this spring, taught at the WVU College of Law for more than 40 years.

Proceeds from the dinner will go to The Innocence Project, an organization that strives to free wrongfully convicted people using DNA evidence.

Valena Beety, chair of the West Virginia Innocence Project, said that Cleckley has tirelessly fought for civil rights legislation and has always advocated for disenfranchised people -- a mission, which echoes that of The Innocence Project.

"Professor Cleckley always stood up for people who didn't have a voice," Beety said. "That's what the West Virginia Innocence Project seeks to do."

Since 1992, the Innocence Project has attempted to raise public awareness about unjust imprisonment and ameliorate the systemic problems that plague the criminal justice system today.

Lawyers for the Innocence Project have used DNA testing to exonerate more than 300 individuals, many of whom were on death row.

"They were pioneers in the use of DNA evidence to help people get their convictions overturned," said Elliot B. Hicks, a lawyer at Spilman Thomas & Battle in Charleston and an organizer of the dinner.

Last year, WVU started an Innocence Project clinic modeled on the original at Yeshiva University, where law students work alongside attorneys to advise and represent convicted clients.

When Cleckley decided to retire earlier this year, the dean of the College of Law asked him how the school should commemorate his career. Cleckley insisted that any fundraising effort in his name go to charity and jumped at a proposal to contribute to the Innocence Project at WVU, Hicks said.

The proceeds from the dinner will fund a two-year Cleckley Fellowship for students who want to work for the Innocence Project clinic after graduation.

"We hope we can raise a substantial amount of money for the Innocence Project and honor Professor Cleckley at the same time," Hicks said.

According to Beety, Cleckley was immensely popular at the College of Law.

"He was loved by his students," Beety said. "He was a phenomenal educator."

Although Cleckley was busy as a teacher and mentor, he continued to work on cases that benefited the community, she added.

"That's unusual at a lot of schools," Beety said.

Cleckley's devotion to civil rights litigation began a trend at the law school.

Today, many professors not only teach and write scholarly works, but also pursue cases that benefit the community, keeping civil rights litigation alive, Beety said.

Students, including Hicks, who took several classes with Cleckley, also remember him as a leader at the College of Law.

"He's a revered professor," Hicks said.

Cleckley clearly and succinctly explained historical precedent to students, Hicks said.

"We came to understand why the law was what it was," Hicks said.

Cleckley briefly left the College of Law to serve on the Supreme Court of West Virginia, where he earned a reputation as a balanced voice and strong writer, who could skillfully reconcile current cases with historical precedent.

"He settled the law by harkening back to other cases," Hicks said. "People could understand how the stream of law came together."

Cleckley also managed to toe the line between the liberal and conservative factions on the court.

One could have assumed that Cleckley, an appointee of a liberal governor, would veer to the left once on the bench, Hicks said. But Cleckley handed down balanced opinions throughout his tenure.

"He brought a period of calm to the court," Hicks said.

Cleckley eventually stepped down from the bench after only three years to continue teaching.

Although Cleckley sat on the bench only briefly, he built a legacy as a keen legal mind, Hicks said. That legacy endures today.

Hicks said that justices throughout West Virginia have continued to call upon Cleckley to outline criminal procedure and to help craft opinions.

The dinner, which is sponsored by several law firms in the Charleston area, costs \$125 per plate to attend. It will take place at the Clay Center in Charleston.

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