Charles Hamilton Houston
People’s Lawyers Series

“A lawyer’s either a social engineer or ... a parasite on society ...
A social engineer [is] a highly skilled, perceptive, sensitive lawyer
who [understands] the Constitution of the United States
and [knows] how to explore its uses in the solving of problems of local communities
and in bettering conditions of the underprivileged citizens.”

Charles Hamilton Houston (September 3, 1895 – April 22, 1950) was a prominent African American lawyer, Dean of Howard University Law School, and NAACP Litigation Director who played a significant role in dismantling U.S. Apartheid laws, which earned him the title, "The Man Who Killed Jim Crow." He is also well known for having trained future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall.

Charles Hamilton Houston conceptualized and led the legal strategy to end legal (de facto) racial segregation in the United States. Houston and those he taught and mentored laid the legal foundation for the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education that made racial segregation in public primary and secondary schools unconstitutional. Houston was the inspiration and mentor to Thurgood Marshall, James Nabrit, Spottswood Robinson, William Hastie and numerous others who carried on the struggle. Houston remains a beacon of inspiration to those legal warriors and activists fighting for social justice and human rights today.

“You have a large number of people who never heard of Charlie Houston. But you’re going to hear about him. That man was the engineer of all of it... if you do it legally, Charlie Houston made it possible...” - Thurgood Marshall

In the tradition of Charles Hamilton Houston, Detroit has a rich history of legal activists [social engineers] who have confronted racism and oppression locally and nationally such as: Milton Henry (Gaidi Obadele), George W. Crockett, Jr., Cornelius Pitts, Elliott Hall, Ernest Goodman, Kenneth V. Cockrel, Sr., Harry M. Philo, Chokwe Lumumba, Carl R. Edwards, Alice Jennings, Jeffrey Lee Edison, Adam Shakoor, Mark Fancher, Ivy Thomas Riley, Gerald Evelyn, Desiree Ferguson, Maurice Sugar, and many others - far too many to name conclusively here.

This program was inspired by Carl R. Edwards, Esq. and his brilliant leadership and ground breaking work in the establishment and expansion of the People’s Law School, a community outreach forum in Michigan that evolved into a national model for replication. Their mission was to be advocates for the rights of the people.

Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History seeks your active participation during these important and engaging lecture series designed to honor the legacy of Charles Hamilton Houston and to move our community, nation and world forward. We promote literacy, critical thinking, independent thought and informed activism.
JEFFREY LEE EDISON, ESQ.
The Role of the Activist Lawyer: Battling Against the Tide of Mass Incarceration

Jeffrey Lee Edison, Esq. is a 1969 graduate of Mumford High School, where he first became involved in student activism. He attended Howard University, where his studies concentrated in political science, African American history, and education; and graduated with honors, in 1973. He returned to Detroit and graduated from Wayne State University School of Law in December 1975.

Mr. Edison has practiced law, primarily as a criminal defense lawyer, since May 1976. He is a member, National Conference of Black Lawyers (NCBL); former National Co-Chair, NCBL; former National Co-Chair, Criminal Justice Section, NCBL; former faculty and former member, Board of Directors, Detroit/Wayne County Criminal Advocacy Program; member, Criminal Defense Attorneys of Michigan, and former member, Legal Redress Committee, NAACP.

Mr. Edison has lectured on various criminal justice issues and has trained lawyers on trial advocacy techniques. He has participated in various programs in correctional facilities to address prisoner concerns and has been involved in community organizing around prison issues, police brutality, and political prisoners.

Mr. Edison is the recipient of the NCBL's Hope Stevens Distinguished Service Award, 1985; the Malcolm X Community Center's African Heritage Award, 1993; the Wolverine Bar Association's Trailblazer Award, 1994 and 2001; the Nation of Islam's Crescent Award, 1998; the Detroit Branch, NAACP's Freedom Fighter Award, 1999; the Criminal Law Section of the Detroit Metropolitan Bar Association's William L. Cahalan Award, 2000; the Wayne State University Organization of Black Alumni's Alumni Achievement Award, 2002; the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Club's Frederick Douglass Award, 2003; and, the W. E. B. DuBois Outstanding Leadership Award, 2007.

Mr. Edison made his first pilgrimage to Africa, which was a life-changing experience, in September 1987, when he represented NCBL on a hospitality tour of Togo, West Africa; and, also spent a week in Ivory Coast, West Africa.

In 1989, Mr. Edison represented NCBL, as part of a Nation of Islam delegation to Libya, in celebration of Libya's 20th Anniversary. In collaboration with the late M. Shanara Gilbert, of NCBL, Mr. Edison, in 1991, presented, “Comments: The Draft Bill of Rights for Post-Apartheid South Africa: Protections for the Criminal Defendant,” at a Constitution Making Conference, in Cape Town, South Africa.
During the trip to South Africa, Mr. Edison was part of a delegation that represented NCBL in Namibia, for Namibia’s celebration of its Second Anniversary of Independence. Mr. Edison met and stayed in the home of the renowned revolutionary freedom fighter, Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, who was a founding member of the Southwest African People’s Organization, SWAPO, which was the vanguard of the liberation movement that gained Namibia’s independence from South Africa. Toivo ya Toivo was captured, viciously tortured, tried, and imprisoned by the apartheid South African regime during the Namibia’s struggle for independence. Mr. Edison met and attended a State Dinner hosted by President Sam Nujoma, where Mr. Edison was honored to present a toast to the president.

In 1992, Mr. Edison returned to Ivory Coast with a parent-student group from Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse of Detroit; and, made a road trip to Ghana, to visit a mentor, Mama Malkia Brantuo, who managed a beachfront hotel in the historic Elmina/Cape Coast area. He and his wife, Shaakira, now travel to Ghana annually.

Mr. Edison has been supportive of and involved with several community-based organizations. He presently is a member, Board of Directors, Aisha Shule/W.E.B. Du Bois Preparatory Academy; member, Advisory Board of the African and African American Studies Program, University of Michigan-Dearborn; and, member, Racial Justice Work Group, ACLU of Michigan.

Mr. Edison has been involved in two major civil rights litigations. He was on the legal team organized by the NAACP, challenging the abolition of Detroit Recorder’s Court, as a violation of the Voting Rights Act. He was also on the legal team for Citizens for Affirmative Action’s Preservation, which was an intervener in the affirmative action litigation at the University of Michigan Undergraduate School.

Most recently, Mr. Edison has worked with Mark P. Fancher, Coordinator of the ACLU’s Racial Justice Work Group, and the Principal Report Drafter, of Reclaiming Michigan’s Throwaway Kids: Students Trapped in the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Mr. Edison has been directly involved with criminal justice system that facilitates the relationship between the school-to-prison pipeline and the mass incarceration of African Americans.

Mr. Edison has also worked, together with Mark P. Fancher, ACLU, Judge Deborah A. Thomas, Wayne County Circuit Court, members of NCBL, Wayne County Criminal Defense Bar Association, Wayne County Prosecutor’s Office, Black Family Development, Inc., and the Wayne County Mediation Center, to develop and implement a pilot Restorative Justice Project for the Wayne County Circuit Court. Restorative justice is based on the idea that a community does not have a crime problem. It has a relationship problem. By repairing broken relationships, restorative justice makes is less likely that someone who commits a crime will do it again. The process provides victims and offenders opportunities to not only learn from each other and other persons affected by crimes, but also to acknowledge the seriousness of the offenses. Presently, youthful offenders with auto theft cases are referred for restorative justice in this court.
Adjoa A. Aiyetoro, Esq.

Adjoa A. Aiyetoro, Esq. joined the UALR William H. Bowen School of Law faculty in 2004. She is currently a Professor of Law and the Director of the Racial Disparities in the Arkansas Criminal Justice System Research Project. She served as the inaugural director of UALR's Institute on Race and Ethnicity from July 2011 to December 2012. Before joining the law faculty she had a career as a human rights attorney and social worker. As a social worker, she served as the supervisor for the Malcolm Bliss Community Mental Health Center’s Model Cities’ outpatient program. She began her legal career as a staff attorney with the United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Special Litigation Section where she litigated cases involving the rights of the institutionalized and developed an expertise in prisoner rights. She joined the ACLU National Prison Project in 1981 where she remained until 1992. Since 1992 she has served as the Executive Director of the National Conference of Black Lawyers, the Director of Administration for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Inc., a consultant to the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, organizing its 1995 delegation to the United Nations Beijing Conference on Women, represented the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) at the preparatory meetings for and the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) held in South Africa, and the Chief Legal Consultant for the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N’COBRA). In March 2014 she received the Washington University George Warren Brown School of Social Work's Distinguished Alumni Award and in April 2014 she received the Arkansas ACLU's Civil Libertarian of the Year Award.

PUBLICATIONS


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The Building of an Ashram, Heart to Heart, AHAM, Vol 21, Nos. 10 & 11, May- June 2001

Reparations, Restoration and Reconciliation, in International Peace Update (Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, October 2000)


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The Abuses of Prisons, Resist, Spring, 1988