

2015

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By Jaime Welch-Donahue

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The Honorable Harry T. Edwards of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit received the 2015 Marshall-Wythe Medallion at a dinner in his honor at William & Mary's historic Wren Building on Oct. 27. The medallion, presented to Judge Edwards by Law School Dean Davison M. Douglas, is the highest honor conferred by the William & Mary law faculty and recognizes members of the legal community who have demonstrated exceptional accomplishment in law.

Previous medallion recipients have included Judge Guido Calabresi, legal scholars H.L.A. Hart and William W. Van Alstyne, Judge Shirley M. Hufstedler, Judge Richard A. Posner, attorney Lloyd Cutler, and numerous Associate Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States, among them William J. Brennan, Jr., Stephen Breyer, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Thurgood Marshall, Sandra Day O'Connor, and John Paul Stevens.

In his remarks, Douglas said that Edwards was chosen as the year's Medallion recipient for his distinguished career as a judge and for the many other ways he has exemplified the ideal of the citizen lawyer, a lawyer who dedicates his or her legal skills to pursuit of the greater good. The Dean traced the trajectory of the judge's career, from stellar student to labor lawyer and pro bono advocate, to tenured professor at the University of Michigan and at Harvard, to his appointment, at age 39, to the federal bench.

As a judge, and later Chief Judge, on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, Edwards, Douglas said, "was known as someone who cared about building a sense of collegiality on a court that was seen, particularly in the 1980s, as one of the most ideologically divided courts in the United States." The Dean pointed to the court's 125-page per curiam opinion in the Microsoft antitrust case as a shining example of Edwards' diplomatic skills as Chief Judge. "To get seven judges to agree on a single opinion of such magnitude was an extraordinary accomplishment," Douglas said.

Throughout his career, Douglas added, Edwards challenged the status quo to improve the administration of justice. In his own court, for example, Edwards advocated for the use of new technologies to reduce the time it took the court to resolve cases. On a



national level, at the behest of the National Academy of Sciences, he co-chaired the Committee on Identifying the Needs of the Forensic Science Community. The committee's 2009 report, the Dean said, "called into question the scientific validity of common forensic techniques" and underscored the need for major reforms.

Douglas also lauded the judge's contributions as a legal scholar on a wide range of topics, including labor law, judicial decision-making, collegiality on the bench, and racial inequality. Edwards, he said, vigorously embraced the role of public intellectual, engaging many in debates about the state of legal education and the practice of law, and the relationship of the academy to the bench and bar.

"We are all the beneficiaries of [Judge Edwards'] high standards as a scholar, as a jurist, as a commentator, and as a court administrator that have led to significant improvements in American law," said Douglas.

In his remarks, Edwards told the story of what led him to pursue a law degree. During his undergraduate studies at Cornell, he initially planned to attain a graduate degree in theology and pursue the ministry, a path inspired by the example of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Edwards had the opportunity to spend time with him when he was selected to escort the civil rights leader during his visit to the Cornell campus. "I was so taken by Dr. King-his brilliance, grace, wisdom, and especially, his genuine commitment to justice-that I decided to go into the ministry," he recalled. Edwards' college mentors, however, encouraged him to consider pursuing a law degree instead for the "wider options [the degree offered] to serve society in pursuit of justice." The judge decided to study law and enrolled at the University of Michigan Law School, a decision, he said, he has never regretted.

Edwards spoke about the criticisms that have been leveled over the years at the way law is practiced, taught and administered in the United States. Despite the profession's "malaise," he said, his "idealized view of the role of lawyers" remains "undiminished." For it is essential that lawyers remain steadfast to their "original understanding of what it means to be a lawyer," said Edwards. "For, in recalling the ideals that brought us to law school, we will be reminded that law is an instrument of justice and that lawyers have a responsibility to understand and employ the law in pursuit of the public good."

The Marshall-Wythe Medallion is named for John Marshall and George Wythe. Wythe, one of the leading statesmen of the Revolutionary Era, was William & Mary's-and the



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nation's-first professor of law. Marshall was among Wythe's first students at the College and went on to have a seminal impact on American history as chief justice of the United States.

About William & Mary Law School

Thomas Jefferson founded William & Mary Law School in 1779 to train leaders for the new nation. Now in its third century, America's oldest law school continues its historic mission of educating citizen lawyers who are prepared both to lead and to serve.