

School commemorates pioneer

Portrait of judge-legislator-activist unveiled.

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An alumnus of the Indiana Law School (now the Indiana University School of Law – Indianapolis) was the first black man to sit as a jurist on an Indiana bench and one of the first black men to be elected to the Indiana Statehouse. Henry J. Richardson Jr., '28, will also be the first black alumnus of the law school to have his portrait displayed at the school.

The portrait, painted by local artist and Indiana University alum Constance Edwards Scopelitis, was unveiled Sept. 8 at a ceremony hosted by the school's Black Law Student Association. BLSA was instrumental in commissioning the artist and raising funds.

At the ceremony, Interim Dean Susanah M. Mead pointed out that many of the portraits that hang in the law school are of former deans, mostly white males, and that adding Richardson's portrait is part of a larger effort to add more diversity to the halls, including images of firsts.

Among the images of firsts who will hang in the halls are Thurgood Marshall, the first black justice of the United States Supreme Court and someone Richardson had worked with; and William H. Hastie, the nation's first black federal magistrate and first black United States Circuit Court of Appeals judge.

The ceremony for Richardson was organized "to show



Photo submitted

The recently unveiled portrait of Henry J. Richardson Jr. is shown amidst the family and supporters who made the project possible. From left are Elisabeth Cheatham, BLSA president; Richardson's son, attorney Rodney C. Richardson; Shelley Jackson, portrait committee member; Kevin Broadius, great-nephew of Henry J. Richardson Jr.

PORTRAIT

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what a great man he was and his impact on the law school," said Shelley Jackson, a BLSA member who helped things come together along with other members of the student group. The project lasted through three administrations of BLSA, as members would graduate and pass the torch.

Jackson said Richardson's family is supportive of the project.

"It's been a long time coming for them. For them, they're gratified to see it's actually happening now. They loved their family member, now they're getting some affirmation he was a huge influence on Indianapolis and the legal community," she said.

One of Richardson's sons, Rodney C. Richardson, an Indianapolis attorney, attended the ceremony and said a few words about his father. His other son, Henry J. Richardson III, couldn't make it because of his schedule as a professor at Temple University School of Law.

Other speakers at the ceremony included Alan K. Mills, a partner at Barnes & Thornburg and alumnus of the law school, and members of BLSA, including Elisabeth Cheatham, BLSA president. The event, held in the Conour Atrium, was standing room only.

Richardson's legacy

"He was a leader in about every civil rights issue," Mills said.

Mills credited Henry J. Richardson Jr. as a mentor who would tell him stories of being in court or as a leader in the Statehouse, both things that, for a black man, were "unheard of in the early 1930s while Indiana was still home of the Klan."

Although Henry J. Richardson Jr.'s name might not be as well known as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, or other national civil rights leaders, Richardson

contributed to civil rights in Indiana spanning half a century starting around the time he finished law school in 1928.

Henry J. Richardson Jr. was originally from Huntsville, Ala. He was born in 1902 and came to Indianapolis in his teens to study at Shortridge High School (now Shortridge Middle School). After he graduated in 1921, he attended the University of Illinois and was an editor of a student paper, "The College Dreamer."

He returned to Huntsville after his mother died but came back to Indianapolis to attend Indiana Law School (now known as the Indiana University School of Law - Indianapolis) and graduated in 1928. For the rest of his life, he would be involved in politics and the law in the Indianapolis community.

In 1930, he was appointed to a temporary judgeship in Marion County - making him what historians believe to be the first black jurist in Indiana. In 1932, he was elected to serve in the Indiana House of Representatives, making him one of the first black people to be elected to the Indiana General Assembly in the 20th century. He served for three terms, focusing on welfare legislation, fair employment practices law, discrimination, and allowing blacks to serve in the Indiana National Guard.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Henry J. Richardson Jr. also contributed to school and housing desegregation in Indiana, including Indiana University dormitories; served as the director of the Civil Liberties

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BLSA member
Shelley Jackson

Division of the National Bar Association (at the time, blacks couldn't be members of the American Bar Association); helped found an organization that helped end segregation in theaters; helped get Dixiecrats off the ballot; and acted as chair of a committee to write the Indiana Anti-Hate Law.

At the ceremony, Rodney C. Richardson shared a story about how his father helped to desegregate hotels in downtown Indianapolis. As a prominent member of the National Bar Association, Henry J. Richardson Jr. helped organize a national meeting of the bar in Indianapolis in the 1940s. At the time, according to Rodney C. Richardson, only two blacks had been allowed to stay in Indianapolis hotels - Marian Anderson, the first black singer to perform with the Metropolitan Opera, and Paul Robeson, an opera singer known for his rendition of "Ol' Man River" from "Show Boat."

Instead of staying in hotels, they would need to stay with black families. Henry J. Richardson Jr. wanted to have the bar association members stay in a central area, so he spoke with members of the hospitality industry in Indianapolis. Hotel owners voiced concerns that the lawyers might not pay for their rooms, they might not tip, and they might destroy the rooms. Henry J. Richardson Jr. ultimately put up a \$10,000 bond to allow the National Bar Association members to stay in the virtually whites-only hotels, which the hotel owners agreed to.

The National Bar Association members stayed in the hotels for the convention over six or seven days, Rodney C. Richardson said, and hotel owners only had two complaints. One was that a limo for the bar association members was blocking downtown traffic during rush hour. The second complaint, Rodney C. Richardson said, was "the black bar members were tipping so well that the hotel staff members were not rendering services

to the white guests."

Shortly after, Rodney C. Richardson said, the hotels were integrated.

In 1935, Henry J. Richardson Jr. became a legal representative of the NAACP, and in 1953 worked with Thurgood Marshall on a case to integrate housing in Evansville. In the late 1950s, he became the first Indiana Life Member of the NAACP and in the next three years he got more than 50 others to take out life memberships.

Capturing his personality

Scopelitis was chosen because, Jackson said, she's "a local artist who does fantastic beautiful work." She had also done portrait work for Mills, who recommended her to BLSA as a potential artist.

At the ceremony, Jackson explained what it was like to work with the artist.

"I expected that it would be a detached business transaction," Jackson said. "But she threw herself into this project, always acting with patience."

Jackson pulled a few images from the archives at the Indiana Historical Society to share with Scopelitis, but Scopelitis also took it upon herself to look through boxes of images in the archives to help get a sense of his dress and personality. At one point, Jackson said, Scopelitis called Henry J. Richardson Jr. a "dandy dresser."

"She brought the process alive for me," Jackson said. "It was more wonderful than we could have possibly imagined. She gave her time, effort, and passion for the project."

The portrait will be hung in the law school on the second floor at the top of the stairs by the elevators. A display in the library, which will be available for a limited time, includes various images of Henry J. Richardson Jr. and a letter he received from Martin Luther King Jr.

Other images and information about Henry J. Richardson Jr. and his legacy are available for viewing at the Indiana Historical Society, www.indianahistory.org.