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Meet Dean Frederic White

New Dean's Experience Enriches the School of Law

By Lorri Ungaretti

On January 1, 2004, Frederic White was appointed dean of Golden Gate University School of Law, the first African American to be named dean of an ABA-accredited law school in California. Frederic practiced law for more than 5 years and taught at Cleveland-Marshall College of Law for more than 25 years.

Early Influencers

Frederic White was born and raised in Cleveland. From an early age, he was a high achiever due, in part, to his father's encouragement. "Once my report card showed mostly As but one B," Frederic recalls. "Instead of saying 'Look at all the As!' my father asked, 'Why the B?' I was worried because the other kids wanted to fight with me and didn't want to play with me because I was getting As." Frederic's father's response was, "Them or me." Frederic's next report card sported nothing but As.

Frederic was also inspired by other students who did well. When he was in junior high school, many of his classmates were not focused on academic success. But Frederic knew several other African-American students who played sports and were also on the Honor Society. "These guys were my heroes," Frederic says. "I thought, 'That's cool. Get good grades and play sports—which the girls like. It was the best of both worlds.'"



Pictured at left: Dean White in 1954 with his two sisters, Carol (standing) and Patricia.

Excelling in High School and Beyond

Frederic attended John Adams, a large high school with 4,000, mostly blue-collar, students. (The student body was half African American and half white.) There, his collection of honors and distinctions grew. When the nationwide program "Academic Challenge for High School Students" came to Cleveland, Frederic was on the school's first three-student team. By the time he finished high school, Frederic had served as president of his class and president of the Honor Society. He was also the outstanding senior on the cross country team and editor of the school paper.

Frederic was the first in his family to graduate from a four-year university. He attended Columbia University

1966–1970, where he earned a B.A. in political science. He proudly recalls participating in the student activism prevalent on college campuses at that time: "I was one of those radicals who helped take over buildings," he says—then smiles, "In effect, I was fighting the system that I'm now a part of."

By the time Frederic graduated from college, he was married and had one son. His original plan was to attend journalism school, but when he was accepted by both Columbia's journalism school and its law school, he thought, "I want to write, but I don't want to be a starving writer." Perhaps most instrumental in his decision to go to law school was his experience as an undergraduate protester.

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"When we students took over buildings," he explains, "I was impressed by the quality and fervor of the African-American and white lawyers who represented us. They weren't doing it for money. I said to myself, 'I ought to do that.' That's what drew me to law school."

In his last year of Columbia Law School, Frederic was interviewed by a number of national firms, including Squire, Sanders & Dempsey, one of the biggest law firms in Ohio. He was not especially interested in the firm and didn't think the interview went well. But as he was leaving, a strange thing

happened: "In the hallway, I ran into the man who interviewed me, and he asked if I knew where he could get coffee. We had coffee together, and I really think that was my interview." Each man won the other over; Frederic and his family moved back to his home town so he could work in the firm's Cleveland office.

Frederic worked as a municipal finance attorney for five and one-half years at



Pictured above: Competing in a 10K run in Cleveland in 1999.

Squire, Sanders & Dempsey. One memory from that time always makes him laugh. "When I told my grandmother that I was a bond attorney, her response was, 'I don't want you to get hurt. I don't want you to have to carry a gun.' I said, 'Grandma, I'm not a bail bondsman. Municipal bonds are different.'"



Pictured at left: Frederic White performing at a law school going-away party in 2000.



Pictured above: Frederic White on Columbia Law School graduation day, May 1973, with his two sons, Alfred (left) and Michael.

A Family Man

Frederic has two sons (Alfred, 34 years old, and Michael, 31 years old) by his first marriage of 20 years. He has been married to Phyllis White for the past 11 years and has a stepson Jahru (32 years old).

While Phyllis may be Frederic's second wife, he met her long before adulthood. "Phyllis was actually my first date," Frederic explains. "We met in seventh grade when we were 12 and went on our first date at 14. We didn't date again." Frederic occasionally saw Phyllis again at high school class reunions. After both of their marriages ended, they began dating. Frederic recalls, "We married each other on December 23, 1992—46 years to the day after my parents married. I wear my father's ring; she wears my mother's ring." They were married in the moot courtroom at Cleveland-Marshall.

Joining Academia

After several years at Squire, Sanders & Dempsey, Frederic gave a speech on municipal bankruptcy at Cleveland State University. Again, fate determined his next career move. He was approached by a Cleveland-Marshall College of Law professor (and former Squire associate) who asked if he was

interested in teaching. He thought he wasn't, but he agreed to an interview anyway.

"The interview was interesting," Frederic recalls. "I went into the dean's suite. Ten people were sitting in a semicircle, and my chair was in the middle. It was like hazing. The first question put to me was hostile: 'Why do you want to teach here?' My response was, 'I don't want to teach. You guys called me about a job. You tell me why I want to teach here.'"

Despite (or perhaps because of) this rocky beginning, Frederic received an offer to teach at Cleveland-Marshall. He considers his acceptance of the position "the best decision I ever made in my life." He taught there for 26 years including serving as associate dean for 5 years.

His fondness for the law school stems from the nurturing he received from professors and administrators. In turn, he began to mentor students, many of whom he is still in contact with years after their graduation.

Frederic has a genuine desire to help his students thrive. "One of the best things about being an academic," he says, "is being able to write a letter for a student who wants a job."



"One of the best things about being an academic," Frederic says, "is being able to write a letter for a student who wants a job."

When a student asks for a recommendation, I say, 'One of these days you will be sitting where I am or in a like



Pictured above: Dean White with Frederic Sr. (now 82) at a family reunion in 1994.

position, and somebody is going to come to you for a letter of recommendation. To the extent you can write one (sometimes you can't), then you must write one. Don't get to where I'm sitting and say, 'I don't have time for you.'"

So how did he come to Golden Gate? "When Golden Gate came calling, I had been a finalist for the dean's job at three other law schools—close, but no cigar. While I had been treated well in each of those searches, I was not really interested in getting back into the market. I was not unhappy where I was at Cleveland State

Pictured at left: Frederic and Phyllis White on their wedding day, December 23, 1992.



Pictured above: Frederic White lecturing in a Real Estate Law class in 2004.

University, and I have a lot of family in the Cleveland area. Therefore, when the Golden Gate University search firm called, I simply said I wasn't interested. Undaunted, they called me back after a few weeks and asked me again. Again, I told them I wasn't interested, thank you very much. Luckily for me, my wife, Phyllis, overheard the phone conversation and 'gently' asked me to reconsider. The rest is history."

What Frederic Hopes to Achieve at GGU

First on Frederic's agenda is to usher in the reconstruction and expansion of the Law Library. "We have been meeting with the architects, and we have a plan that will increase space, efficiency, technology, lighting, shelving, seating, and more," Frederic explains. "The result will be a wonderful facility for students, faculty, and alumni."

Frederic sees his role at Golden Gate as steward for the future. He explains, "What makes an institution great is when it replenishes itself. I'm sitting at this table for the next dean. I want to be part of the nurturing process, working to attract people who are better than I am. I want to do great things here myself, but eventually—just as Peter before me and all those other deans who were here—I want to make it better for the next dean."

Frederic strongly believes that supporting students, faculty, alumni, and staff is a critical part of his role as dean. "We want our alumni to mentor and support our students and the students to eventually become alumni and in turn support students. At the same time, all that doesn't mean much if the staff and faculty morale aren't good. Part of the dean's job is to nurture that. It's a balance."

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Frederic plans to improve the Law School's reputation and standing in the legal community. "I hope to continue to attract a student body that is diverse and competent," he says. "I am taking a critical look at what we're teaching and how we're teaching it. Our reputation is fine, but I want to move it forward."

Part of improving the reputation is increasing pride and satisfaction among faculty, students, and alumni. He explains: "I plan to support the current faculty members so they will mentor the new ones, who in turn will become mentors themselves. It's a replenishment."

On Becoming a Dean

"In my wildest dreams, I never thought I'd be a dean of a law school," Frederic says. "I can remember in 1968 taking over

buildings and railing against the system. I can remember walking out during law faculty meetings in 1978 or 1979 because of what I thought were injustices of race or gender or other problems. Now I've been chosen to become the leader of an institution.

"I have learned that growth includes realizing that what you said or did 20 years ago may or may not have validity today. Everybody has the capacity for adaptation. One thing I want to do here is help our students adapt to the changing times. Law is different now from 10 years ago, and 10 years from now it will be different. We must make sure our lawyers know that they are in the forefront of a new century. Some of the things they learn and do now will have implications in the next generation. It's wonderful for me to be a part of that."



Pictured above: Mr. and Mrs. White at a graduation party in 2003.

Lorri Ungaretti, editor of ClassAction, is the director of marketing and events for the School of Law.