

Tracking Marshall's Steps to the Supreme Court

Exhibit Reveals Justice's Diplomacy

By Susan Kinzie

Washington Post Staff Writer

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At the University of Maryland's law school last night, they honored a man who was barred from admission and later sued the school to change the rule.

Black alumni gathered for a reunion that featured a public exhibit about the late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and his years as a lawyer in Baltimore, where he brought his first major civil rights case against the U-Md. School of Law -- and won.

"This was a person who made history during my lifetime that directly affected me," said Emerson Dorsey, a partner at Tydings and Rosenberg and a 1979 alumnus. "Because of him, doors were open to me that weren't open to my parents, my grandparents."

More than 100 people attended the event.

For decades, Professor Larry S. Gibson, his students and research assistant Delores Mack have gathered historical records about Marshall's

little-known years as a young lawyer in Baltimore in the 1930s, before he went to work for the NAACP and brought the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case that desegregated public schools. They interviewed his friends and his relatives, found old photographs and pored through handwritten court documents, pulling every case that included his name.

The result is a collection that not only gives a glimpse into Marshall's development as one of the country's most celebrated civil rights leaders but also provides a window on a tumultuous time in Maryland's history.



Larry S. Gibson, a U-Md. Law School professor, guided the research into letters and other documents to showcase the life of Thurgood Marshall before he joined the Supreme Court. The exhibit includes 18 photos of Marshall.

(By Jonathan Newton -- The Washington Post)

The documents reveal his diplomacy and his determination to change things, Gibson said this week as he led the way through the letters, newspaper articles and 18 black-and-white portraits of Marshall.

In a letter to his former dean at Howard University's law school in 1933, just days after he was admitted to the bar, Marshall said that it had been difficult to find office space for his new law practice because no one wanted to rent to a black man and that everyone in town was talking about a lynching the night before.

It was the last one in the state, a savage attack on the Eastern Shore. Marshall and several colleagues signed a petition and pushed for anti-lynching legislation.

He took death penalty cases and divorce and other cases in those early years, but increasing amounts of his time were dedicated to civil rights.

In 1935, Marshall took on the U-Md. School of Law. He had never applied, even though it was the public school just minutes from his home in Baltimore, because blacks were not admitted at that time.

Within a few years of graduating from Howard, Marshall challenged the state school over its rejection of an Amherst graduate, Donald Gaines Murray.

In a handwritten letter included in the exhibit, Marshall assessed the evidence, including the poor conditions at black grade schools he had visited and photographed.

He won the case and broke the color barrier at the law school.

Gibson began searching for Marshall's records after students at the school pushed to name the law library after him. Marshall was not eager to comply but eventually gave tacit consent, and the library was dedicated in his name in 1980. Marshall died Jan. 24, 1993.

"We should never forget the continuing work we have to do as a society, as a community, to continue to strive for equal justice under the law in this country," said Andre M. Davis, one of the former students who advocated for renaming the library and is now a U.S. district judge in Baltimore. "I think this exhibit will bring that home."