

Law School Commemorates Brown v. Board

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Yesterday, Columbia Law School began a year-long series of lectures, round table discussions, and meetings to honor the 50th anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education.

The inaugural event featured a panel of speakers, many of whom had contributed significantly to the Supreme Court's unanimous ruling that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

"I cannot think of words more important than these in the past 100 years," said David Leebron, dean of Columbia Law School, in his introductory remarks. The three-hour event paid tribute to the way this small band of lawyers helped pave the way for the Civil Rights movement. But amid the praise and celebration, the speakers repeatedly voiced concerns about the future of integration, racism, and inequality.

"One case alone," said Cecilia Marshall, the widow of Thurgood Marshall, "cannot cure a condition that had its roots in slavery." Thurgood Marshall argued Brown v. Board before the Supreme Court and went on to become a Justice himself. Several of Marshall's classmates from Howard Law School spoke at the event.

The coming weeks and months will see further inquiry into the case's successes and failures. Jack Greenberg, former Columbia undergraduate, law student, and dean of Columbia College, and current professor at the School of Law, organized the lectures with an eye for how the case affected other minority groups such as gays and Latinos. Future panels will also discuss the consequences of Brown v. Board in criminal justice, the arts, and even the laws of other nations.

During a markedly brief question and answer session, a law student expressed frustration over low attendance at the event. "As you can see right now, there aren't enough people who think the issue is important," he said.

Judge Jack Weinstein, a graduate of Columbia Law School, said he sympathized with the student's sentiment. Despite the half century since he worked on Brown v. Board, "we have not been able to establish a sense that this belongs to us."

Earlier, Weinstein had listed contemporary instances of segregation, mentioning New York City as having perhaps the most segregated schools in America. "Though we congratulate ourselves," he said, "I see every day in my court that more needs to be done."

Following the event, Elaine Jones, president of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, said that because residential segregation is still widespread, schools are generally just as segregated now as they were in the 1950s. Since property taxes significantly support public schools, urban and low-income families get the worst education, she added.

"When you take away the purse... you have nothing," she said. "We've had 30 years of retreat from Brown v. Board."

Greenberg agreed with Jones, but pointed out that Brown v. Board's influence could still be seen in the racial integration of colleges and universities. He recalled that there were only two black students in his graduating class at Columbia. Greenberg went on to say that desegregation has substantially influenced the business world, with black CEOs leading companies such as American Express and Time Warner.

The speakers agreed that segregation had diminished in many areas of life outside education. "I knew what the back of the bus was like," Jones said. Segregation, she added, "was a part of our national fabric," going on to describe Brown v. Board as a "seismic" movement in the U.S. history.

Robert L. Carter, who argued a key component of Brown v. Board before the Supreme Court, echoed Jones' depiction of segregated life, adding that throughout his legal work he was reminded that fighting segregation meant fighting for himself.

Brown v. Board of Education is actually a compilation of four cases that overturned a previous Supreme Court ruling that public facilities could be racially "separate but equal." While the Supreme Court's decision in the case required that public schools end segregation, individual states avoided action based on the vague wording of the decision. Only the following year, in 1955, Brown v. Board of Education II required all states to comply with desegregation laws "with all deliberate speed."

Among the other speakers at the event were Professor Kendall Thomas of Columbia Law School and Judge Louis Pollak. Judge Constance Baker Motley and Oliver Hill spoke via video conference.