

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Derrick A. Bell, Jr.

PERSON

Bell, Derrick, 1930-2011

Alternative Names: Derrick A. Bell, Jr.;

Life Dates: November 16, 1930-October 5, 2011

Place of Birth: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

Residence: New York, NY

Work: New York, NY

Occupations: Law Professor

Biographical Note

Derrick Albert Bell, Jr., was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on November 6, 1930. Bell was offered a scholarship to Lincoln University but was unable to attend because he did not receive enough financial aid. Becoming the first member of his family to go to college, Bell chose to attend Duquesne University, earning his A.B. in 1952.

While attending Duquesne University, Bell joined the ROTC, and following his graduation, went to Korea as part of the U.S. Air Force. Returning from the war in 1954, Bell attended the University of Pittsburgh Law School, earning an L.L.B. in 1957. Bell was hired by the U.S. Justice Department after graduation, but left in 1959 over his refusal to terminate his involvement with the NAACP; subsequently, Thurgood Marshall recruited him to join the NAACP Legal Defense Fund where he oversaw three hundred school desegregation cases. In 1966, Bell was named deputy director of civil rights at the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, before becoming a teacher at USC law school and director of USC's Western Center on Law and Poverty in 1968.

In 1971, Bell became the first African American to become a tenured professor at Harvard Law School; there he established a course in civil rights law and wrote *Race, Racism and American Law*, which today is a standard textbook in law schools around the country. Leaving Harvard, Bell became the first African American dean of the University of Oregon Law School, and in 1985, he resigned in protest after the university directed him not to hire an Asian American candidate for a faculty position. Returning to Harvard Law School, Bell would again resign in protest in 1992 over the school's failure to hire and offer tenure to minority women.

In addition to his work in the classroom, Bell was an acclaimed author, having written numerous books, most notably his series featuring fictional civil rights leader Geneva Crenshaw, including *And We Are Not Saved* and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*. In 2002, Bell wrote *Ethical Ambition: Living a Life of Meaning and Worth*, which contained his thoughts on achieving success while maintaining integrity. Most recently, Bell authored *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform*. Bell had been the recipient of numerous honors and awards; his later work included serving as a visiting professor of law at the New York University School of Law.

Derrick Bell passed away on October 5, 2011 at age 80.

Related Entries

Schenley High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Duquesne University [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Bachelor's

University of Pittsburgh [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

L.L.B.

U.S. Air Force [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1952 to 1954]

Officer

Department of Justice; Civil Rights Division [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1957 to 1959]

Civil Rights Lawyer

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1960 to 1966]

Lawyer; Civil Rights

Department of Health, Education and Welfare [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1966 to 1968]

Deputy Director - Civil Rights

University of Southern California [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1968 to 1971]

Adjunct faculty and director of the Western Center on Law and Poverty

Harvard Law School [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1971 to 19801992]

Faculty - Law; Dean

University of Oregon Law School [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from 1980 to 1985]

Dean

New York University Law School [EMPLOYEEOf]
[from 1992 to 2011]

Visiting Faculty