

**Hon. James E. Graves Jr**  
**Class of 1980**

“I don’t want you to expect very much from me,” began Judge James E. Graves Jr’s 2007 College of Law Commencement address. For anyone who knows Judge Graves, this modest expectation seriously understates his lifetime accomplishments, commitment to public and community services, and dedication to our law school.

From humble beginnings in Mississippi, Judge Graves has risen to prominent ranks of the American judiciary. After graduating from Millsaps College, Judge Graves received his degree from our College of Law in 1980 and a Master’s in Public Administration from the Maxwell School in 1981. He joked that he made it through law school on the food he found under vending machines and from the change he found in payphones. Yet, Judge Graves’ storied career is one of determination, dedication, and generosity.

After Syracuse, he began his legal career as a staff attorney at Central Mississippi Legal Services. Following a three-year stint in private practice, Judge Graves returned to public service for good as legal counsel for the Health and Human Services Divisions of the Mississippi Attorney General’s Office. In 1991, he ascended to the bench as a judge of the Circuit Court for Hinds County, Mississippi. Ten years later, he was appointed to the Mississippi Supreme Court, and won election to a full term on the Court in 2004. During his time on the Mississippi Supreme Court, Judge Graves was the only African-American justice and only the third African-American justice in state history. A decade later marked another historic occasion. In 2011, President Barack Obama appointed him to the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, making him the first African-American jurist from Mississippi to serve on that court and, once again, only the third African-American to occupy a seat on the court.

In addition to his work on the bench, Judge Graves has taken, as he puts it, the fire he received within the hallowed walls of the College of Law and used it to “light someone else’s light.” He is an educator, having served as jurist-in-residence at the College of Law and a teaching team member of the Trial Advocacy Workshop at Harvard Law School. He has taught at Millsaps College and other Mississippi universities. He has coached high school, college, and law school mock trial teams. Indeed, Syracuse is especially indebted for his repeated visits to judge the annual Moot Court appellate advocacy competition. Judge Graves also has been deeply committed to working with Mississippi youth and currently serves as a board member for several nonprofit organizations. He has been honored with numerous local, state, and national awards for his steadfast commitments to equal justice for all, to his community, and to enhancing public understanding of the law and the legal system.

Fortunately, when Judge Graves told the Class of 2007 not to expect much, he was referring to the length of his speech, not its content. This important distinction becomes clear as you consider our honoree’s character. His real advice to the graduates that day was this: “Begin each day expecting that the world owes you nothing, and then you will be delighted with every kind word, with every helping hand, and with every little smile which is given to you during the day. And each day when you wake up, just determine that no matter what, you’re going to make the world just a little better than it was when you woke up that day.”

In recognition of his distinguished career and unfailing service to our College of Law,  
Syracuse University College of Law is proud to honor

**Judge James E. Graves Jr**  
with the Syracuse Law Honors Medal.