in Baltimore will be on display as well. The museum has unveiled new figures representing notable NAACP leaders at national NAACP conventions since 2000, and this year’s group is the largest yet. The new inductees are Gloster B. Current, former director of branch and field services; Earl T. Shinhoster, former acting executive director and national field secretary; Myrlie Evers-Williams, former NAACP board chair; and her late husband, slain Mississippi Field Secretary Medgar Evers.

“The NAACP has a long history of fighting for justice,” says Joanne Martin, president and co-founder of the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum. “Making sure that history that has such an impact on how you and I live our lives is preserved, is very important.”

The museum’s NAACP figures are currently housed in its civil rights section. They will be grouped into a new NAACP Gallery of Civil Rights, Law, and Justice after the museum completes an expansion in 2008.

— Frankie Gamber

NAACP Honors
Oliver W. Hill
with Spingarn Medal

At 88 years old, Oliver White Hill Sr. is the only surviving member of the Virginia legal team that helped desegregate American schools in the 1954 landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education.*

At this year’s 96th national convention in Milwaukee, Hill will be the 90th recipient of the Spingarn medal, the NAACP’s highest honor. Previous winners have included W.E.B. Du Bois, Colin Powell and Maya Angelou.

When he learned of the honor—established in 1915 by Joel E. Spingarn to recognize African Americans for distinguished merit and achievement—the characteristically unassuming Hill said, “I was very pleased.”

Esther Vassar, who has scheduled Hill’s speaking engagements for nearly a decade, says the award couldn’t be going to a more deserving person.

“Of course, I think he’s a hero—that’s an understatement,” says Vassar, one of three commissioners of the Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control. “Some people should have their roses while they can smell them. This man went against a whole system to desegregate the schools in America.”

The civil rights work Hill and the others did in the ’30s, ’40s, ’50s and ’60s often went unheralded, with the

“Now I think he understands the magnitude.”

Hill resides in a modest home on a tree-lined street in Richmond, Va., where he was born. He is blind and uses a wheelchair, but the soft-spoken lawyer can recall most of the civil rights cases

— Frankie Gamber

NOTICE
TO ALL NAACP MEMBERS:

Please submit all address changes for members directly to:

NAACP
Membership Department
4805 Mt. Hope Drive
Baltimore, MD 21215
or call:
1-866-63-NAACP
he represented as if he had been in the courtroom yesterday.

Born in 1907, Hill spent most of his boyhood in Roanoke, Va. An only child, he moved with his mother to Washington, D.C., during his teen years to complete high school, which, at the time, was impossible in the segregated Virginia school system.

When a relative showed Hill the United States Constitution, Hill questioned its relevance to marginalized Blacks. He read the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments and realized that people of color weren't receiving the freedoms it outlined.

"He didn't see how segregation could be constitutional," Oliver Hill Jr. says of his father.

Intent on legally fighting segregation, Hill worked as a waiter and porter to earn money to attend Howard University. He enrolled in a special program that allowed him to study for an undergraduate degree in psychology for three years and enter law school the fourth year, says Hill Jr., a psychology professor at Virginia State University.

Charles Hamilton Houston, a Harvard University-trained lawyer, had just taken the helm of Howard's Law School, which turned out to be pivotal for Hill, the former Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, Spottswood Robinson III and others interested in the Civil Rights Movement.

"Houston started with the first class to groom them as social engineers," Hill Jr. says. "It was a conscious strategy orchestrated by Mr. Houston to bring down segregation. [My father] saw himself as part of a team."

That vision never wavered for Hill, who spent his career defending the civil rights of African Americans.

"We were already [treated as] second-, third- and fourth-class citizens," Hill Sr. said in June. "We would have never been citizens" without tenacious civil rights work.

After graduating from Howard, Hill moved to Roanoke, Va., then to Richmond, where his wife, Beresenia, worked as an elementary school teacher and a reading specialist for the local public school system.

He and Robinson became law partners. They argued racially charged cases that often led to death threats and even a cross burning.

Hill Jr. remembers sitting around the dinner table with Marshall and other civil rights legal authorities during his youth: "There would always be these political discussions going on. I knew something significant was happening."

Hill Sr. had many victories. He won his first civil rights case in 1940, in which he argued successfully for equal pay for Black and White teachers in Virginia. In another case, Hill reinforced Blacks' right to serve as jurors.

"There were 118,000 suits who put their eyes and property in danger. Whenever anybody praises him, he always talks about the thousands of unknown, unsung litigants in these suits who put their lives and property in danger."

Also, more than a decade before the Rosa Parks case, Hill represented teenager Irene Morgan, who refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus in Petersburg, Va. The case eventually went to the Supreme Court and led to the desegregation of buses in the state.

In 1951, Hill and Robinson filed a case on behalf of students at an all-Black high school in Farmville, Va. (Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County). Years later it would become one of five cases heard before the U.S. Supreme Court as part of Brown v. Board of Education, which ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional.

Hill continued to concentrate on helping others whose civil rights had been threatened or infringed. His team of lawyers filed more suits in Virginia than the total suits filed in any of the other Southern states during the segregation era.

That fact debunks the view, held by many African Americans, that civil rights successes were gained primarily through churches and ministers, Vassar says.

"Civil rights were gained in courtrooms," she says, and Hill was one of the pioneers, often working for meager or no wages.

"They didn't have huge retainers," Vassar says of Hill and Robinson. "They did it out of a sense of morality and a sense of justice. They practiced for the good of the people. Anybody who would do that has to be a hero of a special kind."

Hill Jr. says his father has never taken individual credit for the success of the Brown[20] ruling or any other civil rights litigation on which he worked.

"Whenever anybody praises him, he always talks about the thousands of unknown, unsung litigants in these suits who put their lives and property in danger."

As Hill Sr. tells it, he simply did his job, which happened to include a sincere interest in helping his community.

Along with arguing numerous civil rights cases, Hill served a term on the Richmond City Council from 1948 to 1950, becoming the first African American elected to the body since Reconstruction. He helped organize the Virginia State Conference of the NAACP and the Old Dominion Bar Association for Richmond's African American lawyers who were forbidden to join the state bar association.

Hill retired in 1998, at age 91, from the law firm he helped found "only because he went blind," his son says.

A year later, President Bill Clinton awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his many contributions.

In 2000, he received the American Bar Association Medal. That same year, his autobiography, The Big Bang: Brown v. Board of Education and Beyond: The Autobiography of Oliver Hill, written with Jonathan K. Stubbs, was released.

Hill Sr. understands that his work led to generations of children having access to an educational system that otherwise never might have been available to them. He is honored to have been part of making history, his son says.

"He considers himself as somebody in the right spot at the right time."

— Stacy Hawkins Adams
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