

2005 MARGARET BRENT AWARDS

Loretta Collins Argrett



Loretta Collins Argrett grew up in a segregated Mississippi of the 1940s and early 1950s, where racism was rampant. Nevertheless, her family taught her that an African American woman from the south could succeed if she worked hard, obtained an education, and believed in herself. In 1954, the year that the U.S. Supreme Court issued the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, Ms. Argrett left home at the age of 16 to enter Howard University, from which she graduated with a B.S. degree in chemistry, with honors. After completing a chemistry fellowship in Switzerland, she worked as a research chemist for several years. Because of her extensive involvement in community activities, she decided that the best way to improve the economic status of minority and disadvantaged communities was to become a lawyer.

At the age of thirty-five with a husband and two young children, the family moved to New England so that Ms. Argrett could enroll at the Harvard Law School. She chose to focus on tax law at a time when few women and almost no African Americans specialized in that area. She believed she could help increase opportunities for minority-owned businesses by providing advice on tax planning.

After graduation, she entered private practice and then moved to Capitol Hill to become the first African American staff member of the Joint Committee on Taxation. Later, Ms. Argrett became the first African American woman partner at Wald, Harkrader and Ross in Washington DC. She also taught at Georgetown and American University law schools. In 1986, she became a full-time professor at Howard University School of Law where she taught tax, business planning, and ethics. There, she inspired her students to consider careers in tax and business.

At the beginning of the Clinton Administration, Ms. Argrett became the Assistant Attorney General, Tax Division, in the Justice Department and was the first African American to serve in that position. She also became the first African American woman in the Department's history to hold a position that

requires Senate confirmation. During her six years at the Department, Ms. Argrett actively championed women and recruited them for positions of leadership. She restructured the Division not only to increase its effectiveness and efficiency, but to provide advancement opportunities for legal support personnel, many of whom were African American "single moms." At one point during her tenure at Justice, the three top positions in the Division were held by women.

Ms. Argrett's professional excellence has been widely recognized. She is an elected Life Fellow of the American Bar Foundation and an elected member of the American Law Institute. She served on the governing council of the ABA Section of Taxation and was a member of the ABA Standing Committee on Legal Ethics and Professional Responsibility. She currently serves on the ABA Joint Commission to Evaluate the Model Code of Judicial Conduct, the ABA Task Force on Gatekeeper Regulation and the Profession, and the Board of Directors of the American Bar Retirement Association.

Ms. Argrett has been honored with numerous awards, including the Harvard Black Law Students Association's "Lifetime Achievement Award for Black Alumni" in 1997; the U.S. Department of Treasury "Chief Counsel's Award" in 1999; "Special Recognition for Contributions to the Tax System" from the ABA Section of Taxation in 2000; and the "Charlotte E. Ray Award" from the Greater Washington Area Chapter of the National Bar Association's Women Lawyers Division in 2004.

Ms. Argrett's energy is boundless. At an age where many would choose retirement, she chose to explore other professional endeavors, as a mediator and as an ethics consultant. In these new areas, she continues to influence and act as a role model for those who know her.