Why Did You Become an Attorney?

In the context of writing the introduction for the keynote speaker of my recent installation I considered why I became an attorney and by the same token, why any of our members went through the rigors of law school and the bar. I began asking some of them. Some of the answers were typical, and included:

"It would have disappointed my parents had I not gone to law school."

One was funny: "I'm Jewish, so my immigrant parents expected me to either become a doctor or a lawyer. I couldn't handle one of the pre-med science courses, so I became a lawyer—and married a doctor!"

Some of the responses were surprising:

"As a child, I was incredibly impressed watching my uncle represent himself as a pro per plaintiff in a trial."

Some were blown away by Perry Mason, L.A. Law and other legal eagles portrayed on TV and in the movies. Others thought becoming an attorney would afford them the type of life they wanted to live.

I became an attorney mid-life. I had many jobs here and abroad in journalism, artists' management and international banking, among others before deciding on a career in the law. For many reasons, including the powerlessness and lack of acknowledgment one often feels as an employee, the law appealed to me. I reasoned that instead of working for a jerk, I wanted to be the jerk, so to speak. I took my fate into my own hands and knew that once I learned my craft, I could do whatever I wanted with it.

I also had delusions of grandeur, having the opportunity of impacting society by changing it in some way. Which brings me to our keynote speaker, Fred Gray.

You would never know when meeting Fred, the important role he's played in American history. He's a very quiet and unpretentious African American. His father died when he was six and his mother raised four children by cleaning the homes of whites in Montgomery, Alabama. He went to law school because he wanted to change society by destroying segregation and he knew the most effective way to do so was through the courts. Not having the opportunity to be educated as a black in then-Alabama, he moved to Ohio to complete his education, then returned to Montgomery with his J.D., opened his own office and, as one might guess, had no clients.

He ate lunch daily with his good friend Rosa Parks. Together they would discuss their shared goal of destroying segregation. Rosa Parks didn't just happen to not give up her bus seat to a white man that day in Montgomery. She did it purposefully, and when she was arrested, she called her friend Fred Gray, saying, "Now you've got a client!"

Fred was one of the architects of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. At the age of 25, and a year out of law school, he won an appeal before the U.S. Supreme Court which ruled in Browder v. Gayle that segregated seating on Montgomery's city buses was unconstitutional.

He not only helped select Dr. Martin Luther King as the boycott's spokesman, but was Dr. King's first civil rights lawyer. While still in his twenties, Fred successfully argued the case of Gomillion v. Lightfoot before the U.S. Supreme Court, which blocked the redistricting of Tuskegee, Alabama. His win afforded political power to blacks in the city of Tuskegee.

Over the four decades since, Fred Gray has won scores of civil rights cases in education, voting rights, transportation, health, housing, jury service and other areas. He represented and won the protection of the Freedom Riders, and the Selma-to-Montgomery marchers. In Williams v. Wallace he won a case which desegregated the staff, students and athletic programs of all state public schools. He not only won a case for the victims of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, but convinced then President Clinton to formally apologize to them in the White House.

Fred Gray has always said that being a lawyer is about helping people. To me, he represents the best a lawyer can be. He knew what he wanted to do and why. He used his legal education to achieve his single-minded goal of destroying segregation. While most of us will likely never have the kind of motivation or opportunity of changing society with as much impact as Fred, each of us has the ability to help people—with their problems and to reach their goals.