

Judge U.W. Clemon's Biography

U.W. Clemon was born in Fairfield, AL in 1943. He attended the racially segregated public school of Jefferson County, Alabama, starting at Dolomite Colored Elementary School, and graduating from Westfield High School as valedictorian of his class in 1961.

As a student of Miles College, Clemon played an active role in the "Selective Buying Campaign," a boycott of the downtown segregated Birmingham stores. That boycott led to his confrontation with "Bull Connor," when Clemon tried to petition the City Commission to get rid of its segregation laws. The next year, when Dr. Martin Luther King started the Birmingham demonstrations, Clemon was assigned the duties of desegregating the Birmingham Public Library and drinking water from the "white" fountain at Birmingham's largest department store. Although he marched several times, he was never arrested.

Clemon graduated from Miles College in 1965 as SGA President and valedictorian of his class.

Clemon received his legal education at Columbia Law School in New York City, partially funded by the State of Alabama. While in law school, he clerked at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund - an organization with which he has been associated for the rest of his life.

On his return to Alabama in 1968, Attorney Clemon spent a dozen years tearing down the walls of segregation in Alabama. From segregated schools to "Bear" Bryant's all-white University of Alabama football team, to large and small employers, to labor unions, he won numerous court battles. His case against United States Steel Corporation and the United Steelworkers of America influenced the desegregation of the entire steel industry in the United States.

In 1974, Attorney Clemon became one of the first two blacks elected to the Alabama State Senate since Reconstruction. Senator Clemon served as Chairman of the Rules Committee, and often battled with Governor George Wallace over racial issues.

Six years later, President Jimmy Carter appointed Senator Clemon as the first black federal judge in the history of the State of Alabama.

With a life-time appointment, Judge Clemon presided over the range of cases that come into federal court. He required four Alabama counties to build new jails because of their unconstitutional conditions. He once jailed a Sheriff who was taking the inmates' food money and using it personally. When he became Chief Judge of the largest federal court in Alabama, Clemon changed the jury plan to make sure that more black and poor citizens were a part of it.

Judge Clemon's most significant case was *Lilly Ledbetter v. Goodyear.*, where he permitted a female engineer to prove to a jury had been discriminated against because of her sex. The Supreme Court held that the case should have been dismissed, over the strong dissent of the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Congress overruled the Supreme Court when in enacted "The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act." This was the first bill signed into law by the new President Barack Obama.

When Judge Clemon retired from the federal bench in 2009, he was replaced by one of his former law clerks, Abdul Kallon - only the third black federal judge in the history of Alabama. Another of his former law clerks is Congresswoman Terri A. Sewell. Yet another is the former Chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the late Jacqueline A. Berrien.

Since his return to law practice, Judge Clemon has handled one of the most controversial school desegregation case in this century: *Stout v. Gardendale Board of Education*, where the mostly white City of Gardendale was blocked from setting up a separate school system which would have excluded many black students. He is featured in the *New York Times Magazine* and *Newsweek* for his handling of the case. Presently, he the local lawyer for the black plaintiffs in the Jefferson County and Hoover school desegregation cases.

He co-authored the article, "The Nation's First Civil Rights Law Needs to Be Fixed," which appears in the August 7, 2020, edition of *The Atlantic*.

Judge Clemon has received numerous awards and honors. Among them are the Distinguished Jurist Award of the Alabama Bar Association, the Stradford Award of the National Bar Association, the Drum Major Award of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, The Johnny Cochran Award of the American Association of Justice, the John Pickering Award of the American Bar Association, and the Thurgood Marshall Award of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. He holds honorary degrees from Miles College, Birmingham-Southern College, Alabama State University, and Alabama A&M University. Two streets in Birmingham are named for him; and there is an endowed U.W. Clemon Scholarship at Birmingham Southern College. Two years ago, the new “U.W. Clemon Elementary School” was opened in the Jefferson County School system.

Judge Clemon is a man of abiding faith. He was Chairman of the Trustee Board and Treasurer of his home church, Jones Chapel AME Church. He was a delegate to the 1984 General Conference of the AME Church. He is now a Deacon of Sixth Avenue Baptist Church in Birmingham.

Judge and Mrs. Barbara L. Clemon have been married for fifty-five years. She is a retired public schoolteacher. Their daughter, Addine Michelle Clemon, a Birmingham lawyer – a graduate of Yale College and Columbia Law School. His son, Isaac, is a musician in New York City - a graduate of Boston’s Berklee School of Music.

Judge Clemon is a 33 degree Mason, a member of the Omicron Lambda Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, and a member of Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity (“The Boule”).