

## Fellows Justinian Acceptance Speech

*By Frank Stevenson, 2023 Fellows Justinian Award Recipient, October 25, 2023*

Thank you, Harriet, for that over-generous introduction. And many thanks to Roger Quillin for the lovely invocation. And to Chuck Snakard for the generous article in *Headnotes* that's reprinted in today's program. I will try to live up to and into the person you all described. And of course I want to thank the Dallas Bar Foundation for this remarkable honor. To imagine my name appearing in the same list as the previous Fellows Justinian recipients is simply breathtaking. Thank you.

Seven years ago I asked Helen's and my friend, Texas Supreme Court Justice Phil Johnson, to administer the oath at my inauguration as State Bar President. As we were about to climb the steps to the stage, Justice Johnson told me that if he deemed my comments about Helen, insufficiently glowing, he would return to the stage, remove me from the podium, and offer comments of his own. I searched his face for some indication he was joking. None was there.

As I processed what he said I tried to conjure up what I had planned to say about my wife. But suddenly my mind was a violently shaken Etch-a-Sketch, a recorded voice endlessly repeating "Your call is very important to us." I utterly forgot the *ingenious* thing I was going to say about you, my dear, and was left saying an *ingenuous* one instead. That "you are my everything, everything, everything." You were then. You still are. You always will be. I scarcely even know where I leave off and you begin. Thank you for everything, my everything.

I also want to acknowledge that my fine son, John, is here today, for which I'm very grateful. And I'd be remiss not to enumerate all the remarkable accomplishments of John and his two sisters. They have provided Helen and me five off-the-charts delightful granddaughters. Which is absolutely wonderful. And, ...well... beyond that I'm sure John and his sisters have done – I dunno – tons of other really cool things and totally rockin' stuff, too. I mean I'm pretty sure of that. Seriously, I am so proud of and grateful for them and their spouses.

I also want to especially acknowledge and thank the attorneys and staff at Locke Lord, who in some cases have been my colleagues for 45 years. And a special note of appreciation to Michael Hair who has been my legal assistant for the last 11 years. And, to his predecessor, Jan Jackson, my legal assistant for 20 years before that. Both are here today.

Friends, I have a few things to tell you about me. But first, let me tell you a few things about you.

In this room today are my classmates from elementary school on up; the guy who dragged me to our Eagle Scout badges; respected colleagues and former colleagues from Locke Lord and other fine firms; clients who placed their precious trust in me; Dallas and State Bar leaders and staff; co-congregants from church who helped me grasp who I was and, more importantly, whose; other volunteers and staff from arts and civic groups, and friends from every corner and chapter of my life. Today's event is precious to me because it affords the opportunity to say thank you.

Roughly 16 years ago I was inaugurated as President of the Dallas Bar. And on that evening, just as I will now, I told you about you.

I reminded that it was you who inspired 112,000 of the youth across this state through the DBA's Mock Trial program. And that it was you who lived out the finest traditions of our profession by representing – for free – nearly 28,000 families through the Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program.

I pointed out it was you, working through the DBA's Law Day and Law in the Schools programs, who assured nearly 100,000 DISD high school students they could be lawyers – or anything else they wanted to be. And it was you.

It was you who bought and built the Habitat homes where 16 families were putting their children to bed that evening as I spoke. You who counseled and comforted nearly 23,000 of the city's least fortunate through LegalLine, who helped 300,000 of our fellow citizens find the attorneys they badly needed through our Lawyer Referral Service, who gave enough blood at our Halloween Drives to save 2,200 lives, who donated the business attire through our Bring-A-Suit Program to confer confidence upon more than 800 disadvantaged job-seekers, and who through the DBA's Toy Collection Drive ensured that more than 9,000 needy children across our city opened a present on Christmas morning. You donated \$4.2 million to our annual Campaigns for Equal Access to Justice – enough to provide legal help to free more than 21,000 families from one sort of bondage or another. And it was you who interviewed, selected, employed, paid, and mentored nearly 400 rising DISD seniors through the DBA's Summer Law Intern Program, an initiative whose alumni uniformly insist changed the very trajectory of their lives.

In the years since then, a few programs have been sunsetted, but worthy new ones, such as the DBA's legal incubator and Together We Dine, have been added. And the programs that continued have extended their reach and impact.

For example, now your Lawyer Referral Service has helped more than half a million people. 63,000 more students have been enriched by Mock Trial; your Habitat-sheltered families have more than doubled to 36; your total gifts to legal aid have more than quadrupled to \$18 Million; and over 650 students have been mentored as Summer Law interns.

You did all of that, and so much more I could have told you about.

Six years ago I spoke from this dais as Chair of the Dallas Bar Foundation. And again, I told you about you.

That you, through this Foundation, have now funded 75 Sarah T. Hughes Diversity Scholarships, thereby securing access for outstanding minority law students to this region's law schools. And you who every year provide the more than a dozen other life-changing clerkships, internships, fellowships, and awards thanks to the generosity of judges and lawyers eager to mentor those to whom we will hand this profession.

Just as importantly, it is you, though this Foundation, who funded grants to allow the Dallas Bar to offer many of the programs I mentioned earlier.

One of those programs – for at-risk DISD students – allowed me to mentor a young man beginning high school. I reflexively spoke to my mentee as I did my own son, John. “When you go to college, you'll need this” and “When you go to college, you'll do that.” But during one of my “when-you-go-to-college” conversations he placed his hand on my arm to stop me and after a few

moments quietly said, “You need to understand something. You’re the first person who ever acted like I was supposed to succeed.”

Without a single family member having finished high school and with his older brother in jail, my mentee had never heard “When you go to college.” He’d barely heard “If you go to college.”

You see I’d witlessly thought that DBA program made possible by this Foundation intended for me and the other mentors to give those students study tips or writing advice. But it actually wanted us to give them something far more precious – namely, our confidence. And three and a half years later I watched that young man graduate in the top 10% of his class. The four scholarships he earned carried him to college in the fall.

Sometimes all a person needs to succeed is for someone to believe in him. And it’s remarkable how often those people are placed and equipped to instill that confidence by this Dallas Bar, this Foundation, and you, their members. It’s what I call the Believing-in-People Business, and it’s the most estimable thing we do; in fact, it’s the most estimable thing anyone does.

So when you roofed a Habitat house, judged a mock trial round, taught in a school, hired a summer intern, you demonstrated that the Dallas legal community is more than just an amalgam of appetites. That instead it is committed to do all it can to ensure that the overlooked or oppressed; under-housed, underserved, or underprivileged, don’t stay that way. That we care not only for the up-and-comers, but also for the down-and-outers. And that the ambit of our energies sweep beyond just the powerful, the purposeful, and the privileged to embrace the least, the lost and the last.

Friends, it must stay that way. We must grow the Believing-in-People Business, resisting the urge to become narrowly self-absorbed with our own professional attainments – our lawyerly recognitions, the size of the deals we closed and verdicts we won. The Believing-in-People Business is not how the world gets changed. It’s the only way the world gets changed.

But enough about you.

Every time I’ve spoken about bar programs I’ve focused exclusively on how other people were helped and other people’s lives were changed. But today I’m setting that pattern on its head and also focusing on how I was one of those people and mine was one of those lives. And I’m suggesting that you and your life were, too.

In a recent issue of *The Atlantic*, columnist and author David Brooks attempts to answer two questions: “Why have Americans become so sad, lonely, and depressed?” and “why have Americans become so mean, rude, and selfish?” He concludes that our society has become – in his words – “terrible at moral formation.” And he defines “moral formation” as the process by which people are made *[quote]* “better than they otherwise might be.” It’s precisely what our contemporary Delphic Oracle, Ted Lasso, is talking about when he says “success” is not winning games, but instead helping his players *[quote]* “be the best versions of themselves on and off the field.”

Brooks believes that moral formation – becoming the best versions of ourselves – is an irreducibly communal practice and not a private one. He writes:

“In a healthy society, a web of institutions – families, schools, religious groups, community organizations, and workplaces – helps form people into kind and responsible citizens, the sort of people who show up for one another.”

In other words, the people who are kind, responsible, and show up for one another are formed in and by institutions – in teams like AFC Richmond, in associations like the DBA and the Foundation, and in every one of the other organizations and communities you and I have been privileged to be a part of. And it’s obvious how that happens.

Several months ago I began volunteering in a neighborhood center for the homeless. But first I received a standard-looking email requesting I come for training at a certain date and time. When I arrived, the place was utter bedlam. It looked like a huge over-caffeinated flash mob playing charades and the only conceivable phrase they were trying to make me guess was “OMG, my pants have been filled with scorpions.” People flooded into the building from everywhere and frenzied folks carrying trays with food ran all around and all over the place. I presented myself, legal pad and pen at the ready, to the profoundly frazzled-looking volunteer coordinator and said I was ready for my training. She tilted her head in that unmistakable bless-your-heart-that’s-the-dumbest-thing-ever-uttered-by-a-biped kind of way and said: “Do you see those folks with the trays running around like crazy people? Do what they’re doing.” Then she raised her arms into the air, snapped her fingers, and shouted “Training Complete!”

Upon reflection, it’s always that way. Maybe not as humorous, and maybe not said explicitly, but every admirable venture in my life has begun with the equivalent of “Do you see those people over there...?” Essentially, “Do you see those people serving as you wish to serve, each being the person you wish to be?” We find those people in the institutions we serve. And we have a word for them. We call them our “heroes.”

My childhood heroes were sports stars and celebrities—people with whom I had nothing in common, living lives utterly unlike my own. I have different heroes now. And more useful. Now they’re people with whom I have everything in common, living lives just like mine, only living them with kindness, responsibility, and showing up for one another the way I want to be living my own. Truth is, I never could have done the windmill basketball dunks or blazing guitar solos my old heroes did, even if my life depended on it. But fortunately, it doesn’t. Instead, what my life depends on is kindness, responsibility, and showing up for one another.

So rather than seeking heroes from some land of unlikeness, I have found them here – in these bar groups, my law firm, and the other institutions I’ve served. Virtue is visual. Before it can be lived it must be seen. And institutions are essential because they are the showrooms of virtue. We pick out our heroes there. As proof of that, a partial list of my heroes has been conveniently included in your program today; you can find it under the heading “Past Recipients of the Fellows Justinian Awards.” If you want to know more of my heroes, look around you.

All of the institutions you and I have had the privilege to serve have equipped us to outlive the persons we would have been without them. Outlived not chronologically, but morally; not horizontally, but vertically; not by length but by height. And by doing so provided us with purpose, pride, and personal satisfaction at a time when so many Americans are starving for them.

But that's under attack. The acid bath of wrath currently masquerading as our national dialogue has grown increasingly anti-institutional. Regularly confronted with the failures and fecklessness of our most prominent institutions, our bowling-alone culture has become increasingly hyper-individualistic and wary regarding commitment. You and I must act as antidote to that and remain joiners. Recommitting ourselves and recruiting others to the institutions that equip us to improve our communities and, in so doing, improve us. The 25 new Fellows we welcomed today show we are on the right course.

But enough about institutions.

Almost 50 years ago, an obscure, unknown Irish poet visited an obscure, unknown New England liberal-arts college to read his poetry to the literature students there. At some point he took a copy of his work and wrote on the frontispiece these three spare lines:

“The bird a nest,  
the spider a web,  
man friendship.”

The lines he quoted affirm that just as palpably as a bird is supported by its nest, and just as tangibly as a spider is held up by its web, so are we all supported and held up by this mysterious force we call “friendship.”

A lot has changed from 50 years ago. That obscure, unknown Irish poet was Seamus Heaney, the 1995 Nobel Laureate in Literature. And that obscure, unknown New England liberal-arts college? Well ... it's still an obscure, unknown New England liberal-arts college.

I did not arrive at this place in my career under my own steam. Nor am I receiving this remarkable recognition due to my own efforts. My friends, I'm here today because of you.

I cannot recall being entirely certain I could perform a single significant office or task at the time I agreed to undertake it. But you often saw something in me I didn't always see in myself. And sometimes I said “yes” relying on the confidence I felt only because you had placed it there.

Thus I've been the benefactor as much as the bestower in the Believing in People Business. I hope all of us have.

And I also hope the friendship that brought us here will continue to support and hold each and every one of us up for as long as we live.

Just like the bird a nest.

Just like the spider a web.

Thank you.