



RAISING THE BAR

By Kai Jackson Issa

In preparing black men for law school and careers in the legal field, few names in the nation stand above that of Morehouse political science professor, author and constitutional scholar Abraham L. Davis '61.

Many educators claim to measure their success by the yardstick of their students' accomplishments. For Abraham Davis, the metric is genuine. He has steered more than 600 of his students into law and law-related careers over the past 41 years, with many entering some of the most prestigious law schools in the country. Twenty-six of his students are Harvard Law School graduates. Among his many successful students are two current college presidents, including current Morehouse President Robert Michael Franklin Jr. '75, as well as 17 judges, 16

Ph.D. recipients, two U.S. ambassadors one U.S. Congressman.

The secret behind such prolific results: raising the bar.

"In all my years teaching at Morehouse, I refused to lower standards. I never compromised," he says. "My philosophy is to reach students where they are, and if you always keep your standards high, there is a greater possibility that students, even average or below average students, will rise to those standards.

"My distinctive contributions to Morehouse are the number of students who are success stories and in teaching a cadre of lawyers who are in very strategic positions throughout the U.S."

One former student is Greg Griffin '80, chief legal counsel of the Alabama Board of Pardons and Paroles.

"Dr. Davis inspired me to dream

more, learn more, do more and become more," he says.

Davis himself was an early pupil of high expectations. Both his parents had college degrees and instilled in their nine children the value of education. All of his siblings completed college, and from the Davis clan sprang two doctorate holders, a lawyer and even a heart surgeon.

Tuskegee (Ala.) Institute, his hometown pride, was an early source of inspiration. "We took a lot of pride in Tuskegee Institute. It gave youngsters a lot of faith that they'd be able to attend college someday. Parents would go out of their way to take their children to programs and performances at the chapel."

His older brother, Lowell, graduated from Tuskegee and became one of the nation's earliest African American open-heart surgeons. Ironically, however,

Lowell insisted that his little brother attend Morehouse College. It was 1959 and the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision had recently declared segregated educational institutions unconstitutional. The state of Alabama was still refusing blacks entry to white state institutions, instead granting them tuition waivers to attend colleges outside of the state.

Alabama's stubborn prejudices afforded Davis the opportunity of a lifetime—on the state's dime.

"What I received at Morehouse was a great sense of self-confidence and a high level of motivation," says Davis.

No one inspired him more at Morehouse than the eminent social scientist Robert Hughes Brisbane, who founded the College's political science department. "During Dr. Brisbane's time, political science was a one-person department," Davis recalled.

After graduating, Davis decided to continue his study of political science at

tional presence to me as a student," Davis remembered. "I was always impressed by his integrity, his speeches and the high moral standards he set for us."

The two had a casual conversation and Davis thought that was the end of it. "I never thought I'd end up teaching at the same place I attended," says Davis. A few weeks later, days before he was planning to accept a teaching position at Michigan State University, he received a 6 a.m. phone call from Mays inviting him to join the Morehouse faculty.

The rest, as they say, is history—or, in Davis' case, the substance of legend. For four decades, Davis helped to increase the size and prominence of the political science department, serving twice as department chair. He also authored numerous books, including *The Supreme Court, Race and Civil Rights*, which is used in undergraduate classrooms throughout the country.

Davis' two signature classes, Race and Law and Constitutional Law (known

power of law.

"I put an emphasis on how to brief cases thoroughly, and to pick out core principles in a case, because I knew that's what our students would need in order to succeed in law school," Davis says.

It is no surprise, then, that many of his former students are among the finest legal minds in the nation. Like Michael Tyler '77, a Harvard Law School graduate and the first African American partner at Kilpatrick Stockton LLP, one of Atlanta's oldest and largest law firms.

"When we arrived at law school, we found out that we were actually better prepared than most of our classmates because we had been subjected to the rigors of Dr. Davis' concise, yet comprehensive, constitutional law course."

After 41 years of service at the College, Davis resigned in 2008 to pursue his lifelong passion for global relations. Now a consultant with the State Department, Davis frequently travels internationally—most recently to Sri Lanka and Maldives—serving as a U.S. judicial system expert to many international groups. His work at the state department is a culmination of the particular genius he brought to educating individuals about the law.

Perhaps no one appreciates the Davis influence more than Ronald Sullivan '89 a graduate of Harvard Law School who currently serves as clinical professor of law and director of the Criminal Justice Institute at Harvard.

"At the time I applied to Harvard Law, no one for whom Dr. Davis had written a recommendation had been declined admission," recalls Sullivan. "I was elated when he agreed to write a recommendation for me.

"Dr. Davis was far and away one of the best teachers I had at Morehouse," he continues. "He had a lasting and profound influence not only on my academic development, but my character development."

"I owe a lot to Doc." ■

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the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where he received a master's degree, and then on to Ohio State University, where he received his Ph.D.

By 1967, Davis was an up-and-coming political science scholar when a chance meeting with then-Morehouse President Benjamin Mays steered him back to his alma mater. Davis was in Atlanta interviewing for a teaching position when he decided to pay a visit to his old college president. "He [Mays] was an inspira-

as "Con Law"), were among the most popular and widely enrolled of any at Morehouse, drawing students from the Atlanta University Center and other Atlanta campuses.

Davis' masterful teaching of the legal brief in his constitutional law course is legendary. He exposed his students to a broad range of constitutional cases, from freedom of the press, to religion, to voting rights—igniting in many of them an appreciation for the transformative