



CLEMENT KERN SOCIAL IMPACT AWARD HONOREE

Judge Damon J. Keith
(1922 – 2019)

“Judge Damon Keith was a unique figure. He was the grandson of slaves who grew up in that dark era of segregation and yet through his brilliance and determination changed this nation in fundamental and positive ways. Without his commitment to justice, without his courage, without his trailblazing abilities, I would not have been the first African American attorney general, and Barack Obama probably would not have been the first African American president of the United States. We stand on his shoulders.”

— Eric Holder, U.S. Attorney General in the Obama administration

In March, Judge Damon Keith accepted our invitation to receive a Clement Kern Award for Social Impact. On April 28, the Judge passed away. On the day of his funeral, all American and Michigan flags in the state were lowered to half-staff to honor his life and legacy.

Damon Keith was a civil rights icon and a towering figure in American jurisprudence. He had served as a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit for 42 years. During his tenure on the bench, Judge Keith authored decisions and dissents that ultimately made the Law and the nation more inclusive and just. His rulings enforced civil rights, advanced equal opportunity, and challenged government overreach.

Damon was born in Detroit on July 4, 1922. He graduated from West Virginia State College, served in the Army, and obtained law degrees from Howard University and Wayne State University. He built a pioneering law practice in Detroit, served on the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, was appointed by President Johnson to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan in 1967, and ten years later was appointed by President Carter to the Sixth Circuit.

Beyond his impact on the Law, Judge Keith had a profound influence on a generation of lawyers who embody his conscience and his commitment to equal justice. He hired more than 100 law clerks, including more African Americans than all other federal judges in the 20th century combined. The “Keith judicial family” is a remarkable success story and constitute his living legacy.

Judge Keith received many important awards, including the NAACP’s Spingarn Medal, the Edward J. Devitt Distinguished Service to Justice Award, and over 40 honorary degrees.