

Black History Month

A Florida Focus

A CIVICS IN REAL LIFE SERIES: CIVICS CONNECTION SPOTLIGHT

Spotlight #12: Virgil D. Hawkins

When it comes to the story of desegregation efforts in the realm of public education, [Virgil D. Hawkins](#) is a name one should know. Because of his efforts in the latter half of the 20th century, Virgil Hawkins was directly responsible for ending segregation at the [University of Florida's law school](#). His journey began in 1949. At that time, Mr. Hawkins worked at [Bethune Cookman College](#). He decided to go to law school and applied to the University of Florida (UF), which had the only law school in the state. Despite being a qualified candidate, UF denied Hawkins' application because he was black. Mr. Hawkins sued UF under the auspice that his [14th Amendment right](#) to equal protection under the law was violated. His case made it to the Florida Supreme Court. Despite the justices finding that he met "all scholastic, moral and other qualifications" necessary for acceptance except for "race and color", they [ruled](#) that a not yet created, but state proposed separate law school, built for black students at the [Florida A&M University](#) campus in Tallahassee, was an adequate solution. After [two additional attempts](#) to convince the Florida Supreme Court to reverse its decision failed, Hawkins appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Following the [Brown v. Board of Education](#) (1954) decision, the Court issued a [per curiam decision](#) in Hawkins' favor, remanding the case back to the Florida judicial system now that "separate but equal" was no longer the law of the land. For the next three years, [more court battles ensued](#). Each time he lost in the Florida Supreme Court, the Federal District Court and U.S. Supreme Court affirmed his right to attend. In 1958, Mr. Hawkins [withdrew his application](#) in exchange for a court order desegregating UF's graduate and professional programs. Subsequently, he attended both Boston University where he earned a masters degree in public relations and the [New England School of Law](#) where he earned a law degree in 1964. Upon his graduation, Hawkins returned to Florida to practice law, but was rejected by the Florida Bar due to a requirement that its lawyers attend accredited institutions and the New England School of Law was not yet accredited (they would be in 1969). If Hawkins had been admitted to UF when he originally applied, he would have qualified for "diploma privileges" which would have earned him admission to the Florida Bar without examination. In 1976, he again sued, and again appeared before the Florida Supreme Court. This time, the [justice's agreed](#), and finally, after a 25 year battle "the South's most patient man was finally a lawyer" at the age of 70. Virgil Hawkins opened a [private law firm](#) in Lake County, mostly representing poor and under-represented clients. While a practicing attorney, he [faced ethics charges](#) from the Florida Bar for inadequate and incompetent handling of clients' cases and the misappropriation of funds. The amount of time he spent fighting to be able to practice law in Florida may have been what contributed to some of his ineffectiveness as an attorney. In fact, the Florida Supreme Court inserted a footnote about this concern when it granted him access to the bar in their decision. Rather than face disbarment, Virgil Hawkins resigned from the Florida Bar. Despite Hawkins' legal indiscretions, his contributions to desegregating the State University System of Florida cannot be overlooked. Following Hawkins' death in February of 1988, the Florida Supreme Court issued a [posthumous bar reinstatement](#). In 1989, Governor Bob Martinez would sign a bill into law, naming [UF's legal clinics](#) after him. And 52 years after his journey began, in 2001, UF [awarded](#) Hawkins its first, posthumous honorary degree. During a [special ceremonial session](#) to mark the 50th anniversary of Hawkins' Florida Supreme Court's desegregation lawsuit, Chief Justice Major B. Harding reminded the audience: "Ladies and gentlemen, you have heard about a regrettable and poignant moment in the jurisprudential history of this Court. We must learn from the lessons taught... hatred and discrimination will not triumph." Chief Justice Harding's words were a poignant reminder of the civil rights contributions made by Virgil D. Hawkins.



Virgil Hawkins Asks Supreme Court Order

Requirements

Virgil Hawkins, a pioneer in the fight for desegregation, was the first African American to attend the University of Florida. He was denied admission to the law school because of his race. He sued the university, and the case went to the Florida Supreme Court. The court ruled in his favor, but the university appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in his favor, but the university appealed to the Florida Supreme Court again. The Florida Supreme Court ruled in his favor, and he was admitted to the law school.

CONNECTION QUESTIONS

- How does Virgil Hawkins' story demonstrate the role of the judicial branch in limiting and safeguarding civil rights and liberties at the state and national levels?



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