

PROFESSOR WILLIAM J. ALDRIDGE, JR.

1942-1974

William J. Aldridge, Jr.

“ . . . a man may live as greatly in the law as elsewhere . . . there as well as elsewhere he may wreak himself upon life, may drink the bitter cup of heroism and may wear his heart out after the unattainable . . . ”

These words of Oliver Wendell Holmes have special poignancy for the man who devotes his career to teaching the law. He is the long distance runner. Certainly, there are many immediate satisfactions for him. Not the least of them is the happiness he finds in the mastery of his subject matter and in the transfer of his insights and wisdom to his students. He is a member of a noble profession; he has a sense of fraternity, of collegiateness; and a recognition that society needs the kind of creative thinking and problem analysis that a law school professor can best provide. Through his publications, clinical work or participation in bar association activities, he shares his love of the law. And as he does, the satisfactions multiply. Or so they should.

He also has the missionary zeal of the evangelist. Not content with the discoveries he has made, he is compelled both to pursue a fuller revelation and to preach to the young and to all who will listen, his findings of the truths that will make them free; free to live without fear, free to own property, to have equal opportunity, to achieve one's potential. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It's all there, centered around the rule of law.

And yet, the law teacher's path is endless and there are long stretches of isolation. The classroom empties out; the students graduate into the arena; but the law teacher turns back to page one gearing up for the next group. Year after year. With each class, moreover, the truth may seem more difficult to convey; law reform more urgent; the search exhausting. Last year's realities are this year's illusions. The world is becoming more lawless. The truths are rejected. Leaders disappoint.

This uneasy mix of professional satisfaction and personal isolation were interwoven in the career of our first full-time black faculty member, William J. Aldridge, Jr. Cut down brutally by lawless assailants, he did not live to see his first class of students graduate. An alumnus of our school, he died on the very day of our Commencement Exercises in the spring of this year, two days before the official groundbreaking for our new building.

In the law school community all of us have died a little. The future, once so certain, is obscure now; the goal more distant. But we take heart from the knowledge of Bill's many contributions to our young law school. We heed his words, the words of the dying Sohrab: "Do thou the deeds I die too young to do."

Those who teach thereby become immortal. They live on through the achievements of their brothers on the faculty and through those students who have been passed the torch. Or so they should.

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