Member Spotlight:
Morris Dees ABA Medal Acceptance Speech

Morris Dees, co-founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center, received the ABA Medal at the House of Delegates meeting during the Association’s 2012 Annual Meeting in Chicago. Dees received the ABA’s highest honor for his efforts to ensure access to justice for society’s most vulnerable members. The following is a transcript of the comments offered by ABA President Wm. T. (Bill) Robinson III on August 7, 2012. Video of this event can be viewed by clicking here.

ABA President Wm. T. (Bill) Robinson III: Thank you very much, Madame Chair. As my final responsibility as President of this great Association, it is my special privilege this morning to present the ABA Medal.

Morris Dees Jr. is a selfless public servant, passionate trial lawyer, and courageous social justice and civil rights leader. Today, the American Bar Association confers upon Mr. Dees its highest honor, the American Bar Association Medal.

The medal, first awarded 82 years ago, honors those who have given conspicuous service to the cause of American jurisprudence.

Mr. Dees is worthy of this medal because of his steadfast fight against racism and injustice, which has positively transformed the lives of countless Americans.

Born in 1936, the son of an Alabama cotton farmer, Mr. Dees began his life in a rented farmhouse near Montgomery without plumbing. An entrepreneur at heart, he successfully operated a livestock business as a teenager, which allowed him to save enough money to take his father’s advice and enter college. Later, he graduated from the University of Alabama School of Law.

But his path to the law was not a straight line. Several times he was diverted by other business interests including direct mail and publishing.

In 1967, Mr. Dees embarked on the path toward becoming a full-time civil rights lawyer. He sold his publishing business and used the proceeds as seed funding to create the Southern Poverty Law Center in 1971.

The center soon became known for fighting the unequal implementation of the death penalty and for championing the rights of the underdog. In an early but influential case, Smith v. YMCA, Mr. Dees showed that the city of Montgomery had entered into a private agreement with the YMCA to avoid having to integrate the city’s recreational facilities. The city had simply closed all its parks and pools and secretly agreed that the YMCA — which is a private entity and not subject to the Civil Rights Act — would take over. Mr. Dees brought this secret agreement to light and obtained a court order forcing the YMCA to comply with the Civil Rights Law and integrate its facilities.

With his skills in the courtroom, Mr. Dees also prevented a great injustice through his representation of the “Tarboro Three” in North Carolina in 1973. The three black defendants had been accused of the rape of a white woman and had been convicted and sentenced to death. Mr. Dees obtained a reversal by showing that numerous errors had occurred in the first trial. He ultimately obtained a plea bargain that resulted in the release of the young men.

Mr. Dees has pioneered the use of civil lawsuits to secure judgments against racist and hate groups. In the 1980s, Mr. Dees used the law to hold the Ku Klux Klan accountable for the actions of its members. Ultimately, he won a $7 million judgment for the mother of a black lynching victim in Alabama. The payment of the judgment bankrupted the United Klans of America.

In the 1990s, Mr. Dees used similar tactics to obtain massive monetary judgments against several other hate groups. As a result of his ardent advocacy, Mr. Dees has suffered property loss and endured many threats to his personal safety.

His contributions to the law, to human-kind and to the evolution of our nation are beyond measure.

The presentation of the ABA Medal today to Morris Seligman Dees Jr. represents our profound admiration for his personal courage and incomparable leadership as one of the greatest civil rights lawyers of our time.

We are indeed indebted to Mr. Dees as a — how should I put it — an exemplar of
what our profession means to this country. His service, his dedicated service; . . . and we are extremely pleased and privileged today to present him with the ABA Medal, Mr. Dees.

MORRIS DEES' ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Mr. Dees: Thank you so much for that warm welcome from this wonderful organization.

I am sure that you can imagine how lonely the existence of a civil rights lawyer in the Deep South was back in the 1960s and 70s. And to be recognized by the organization that I consider to be the glue that holds our legal system together, the American Bar Association, to be embraced by you . . . erases all the loneliness and tough fights that I’ve been through with the help of so many people.

I want to thank my family, especially my wife Susan Starr.

My children are scattered all over America doing wonderful things . . . and I want to thank them because, during all the times we’ve had issues that threatened us — when the Ku Klux Klan burned our building in 1983 and the social isolation — they always stuck by me.

When Bill called about this award, I stopped and thought, you know, I didn’t get this thing by myself. You’re giving this award to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the 43 lawyers who work there now and several hundred who have come and gone over the years, many who are doing wonderful things in this country. I want to especially thank co-founder Joe Levin and Center President Richard Cohen. None of our lawyers have ever backed down or quit; or any of our staff has ever backed down or quit because of the trials and tribulations we’ve had to face.

And after I got that call from Bill, I started thinking — you know, I have to send a thank-you note to people who made all this possible. I came up with 157 lawyers in this country. Some of you sitting here got a note thanking you for your pro bono help on cases we’ve done around the country. I can assure you their help has been appreciated, and has added enormous inspiration and money and talent to our helping those with few champions.

And I want to thank the 350,000 contributors to the Southern Poverty Law Center. Many of you are here too. Without your help, we couldn’t fund our work nor afford the 200 Center staffers.

But the people I want to thank the most are the people who have made my life more meaningful over these last 52 years as a trial lawyer. And those are the judges, and the juries, and the clients that we represented.

And as I look back over those, I think about the 65 or so people we represented in capital cases; death penalty cases. Most of them were guilty; a few were innocent; but none deserved to die.

And I think about representing Sergeant Roy Patterson, a decorated Vietnam Veteran — a black man — in Cordele, Georgia. He shot two Georgia law enforcement officers who were beating him up in a small police station. He took one of their guns away and shot them in self-defense.

And I will never forget the courage of that jury back in 1975 that decided that he didn’t deserve to die. He finally walked out of prison a free man after 13 years of appeals.

And I think about the family that drove by the compound of the Aryan Nations in Coeur D’Alene, Idaho, and were beaten by the Aryan Nations’ security guards who thought they were Jews coming to attack.

This innocent family didn’t even know they were driving past a neo-Nazi compound. And I think about that jury who was certainly afraid of what might happen to them if they ruled for the prosecution, and the judge who gave them the backbone to render a verdict that allowed us to bankrupt the Aryan Nations and take their property.

And a very courageous federal judge gave the Klan a fair trial before entering a very strong and serious injunction enjoining the Klan and some violence-prone American fishermen from interfering with the Vietnamese fishermen.

And as I stood with them on the dock at the blessing of the fleet a few days after that order came in, when they went out to fish — I have to tell you, as I stood there and watched those fishermen and their relatives — those new Americans finding a place at America’s table — I not only felt proud to be their attorney, I felt proud seeing the majesty of our American justice system at work.

And finally, I think about the client who taught me lessons probably more important, more significant, and more meaningful than I learned at the little Baptist Church I grew up in that cotton farming...
community in Montgomery County, Alabama.

I represented Beulah Mae Donald, whose son Michael was lynched by Klan members. It was the United Klans of America whose members burned the church in Birmingham that killed four little girls as they attended Sunday school. And then they decided to lynch a black man — any black man — to terrorize blacks from serving on juries in Mobile, Alabama.

One of the young Klansmen who had taken part in the lynching turned evidence in our civil trial against his Klan leaders. And while he was telling the jury what happened he broke down and started crying.

Mrs. Donald was sitting a few feet from him, next to the jury box, in that Mobile courtroom. I thought the judge was going to stop and grant him a recess so he could regain his composure. But the young Klansman cleared his throat and looked over at Mrs. Donald and asked, “Can you forgive me for what I did to Michael?”

And she looked at him in front of that jury, rocked back in her chair — and if I live to be a hundred; if I tried a thousand more cases; I don’t think I’d ever be more moved when she said softly to him, “Son, I’ve already forgiven you.”

There wasn’t a dry eye at our counsel table or in the jury box, and I saw that old judge brush back a tear. This mother who had lost one of the most precious things in her life had the understanding, the love, and the mercy — something that we hear so much about, but honestly know so little of — that she could forgive that man.

And I thought the words that came out of her mouth were a higher justice than the $7 million verdict that jury rendered later that night.

I think today about those five Sikhs and others wounded, I think about the continued hate and racism and injustice and anger that is dividing our country.

I give thanks to the American Bar Association for your commitment to the rule of law.

And I know that . . . the words the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. chose from the Prophet Amos and used in his famous speeches . . . that “you will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

Thank you so much.