Attendees at the 2015 Annual Forum on Construction Law’s Diversity Lunch, were inspired and moved by the luncheon’s keynote speaker, Mr. Fred Gray. Through the efforts of the Forum’s leadership, Mr. Gray’s speech was simulcast into classrooms and auditoriums nationwide, so that not only forum members but also students spanning the country could be inspired by the words of a man who made a vow to himself to change history, and kept it.

At age 24, Fred Gray served as the lawyer for Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which began the modern civil rights movement. In his speech to the forum Mr. Gray, a spry and eloquent gentleman of 84 years, began with a fascinating anecdote. He talked about his youth, growing up in Alabama, and experiencing and seeing the prejudice doled out in the segregated south. He vowed as a young teenager that he would go to college, go to law school, and that he would dedicate his career as a lawyer to ending the inequality to which he and his fellow men and women had been subjected, and put an end to segregation. In his speech to a silent and rapt audience, Mr. Gray provided a glimpse into the minds and hearts of the individuals behind the civil rights movements, their strategies, their nods to politics, and the careful selection of the team that would go on to change American history.

Every student learns the story of Rosa Parks, an African American woman who, at the end of a long working day in Montgomery, Alabama, boarded a public bus and made her way to the back. According to the lessons learned in civics classes, when the white
section of the bus was full, and another white passenger boarded the bus, Ms. Parks was ordered to give up her seat to the white passenger. Tired after a long day’s work, Ms. Parks quietly refused, and so it all began. This, Mr. Gray related at our meeting, and in his book, Bus Ride to Justice[1], is all true. But what is also true, and was previously unwritten until the newest edition of Bus Ride to Justice, is that Ms. Parks’ quiet refusal to give up her seat was not entirely unplanned. Rosa Parks “was not as meek as many still believe, she was not merely tired from a day’s work, and her arrest was not exactly an accident.” Ms. Parks was, at the time, a secretary for the NAACP, and had led some of its youth groups. She and Mr. Gray knew each other, worked near each other and would often have lunch. During those lunches they talked about what a person should do if arrested for refusing to give up his or her seat. They must remain calm. They should not sit in the first 10 rows on the bus, but sit in the section unofficially designated for non-whites. Ms. Parks and Mr. Gray had a plan. If she should be arrested, she would not resist but would cooperate. She had his number and would call him. But it was essential to the movement that Ms. Parks not be seen as a radical, and so Mr. Gray never discussed or wrote about her role as secretary for the NAACP, and their quiet plans, until after Ms. Parks had passed on. Mr. Gray finally shared this in the most recent edition of his book, and in his speech to the Forum at the Forum's annual meeting. So, on the fateful day that Rosa Parks boarded the public bus, made her way to the back, then quietly refused to relinquish her seat when asked, she set in motion a movement that had been carefully planned. The rest of the story, of course, is history.

Mr. Gray’s speech provided an amazing glimpse into the civil rights movement’s strategy for effecting change through the law, and was, in particular, an inspiring speech for lawyers because it demonstrated how lawyers have unique powers to be agents for positive change. After Fred Gray concluded, Steve Lesser, Chair of the Forum commented to the audience that “the Forum is more than just about construction law”. As pointed out by Lesser, “the objective of having Fred Gray speak was to raise awareness about diversity and inspire our members that they can make a difference in society through the practice of law”.

It was also one of several excellent programs put on by the Forum's Diversity committee, currently chaired by Christopher Montez. The last Diversity event included an equally excellent address from Bernice Donald, the first African American woman to be appointed and confirmed to the 6th Circuit Court of Appeals. In putting on these programs, the Diversity Committee has carried out the strategic plan it put in place in 2010, to

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reflect the Forum’s continuing commitment to meaningful and consistent opportunities for diverse lawyers within the Forum.

Endnote