

A trailblazer's legacy in action: The inaugural H.T. Smith Symposium convenes at Law School

The Center for Ethics and Public Service hosted the symposium on civil rights in Florida featuring pioneering alumnus H.T. Smith, J.D. '73.



Ray Taseff, H.T. Smith, Anthony Alfieri, Elizabeth Schwartz, J. Courtney Cunningham, and Chris Lomax

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-26-2026

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The University of Miami School of Law served as the stage for a critical convergence of legal experts and advocates on the Coral Gables campus. On February 18, the Center for Ethics and Public Service (<https://www.law.miami.edu/academics/centers-institutes/ceps/>) hosted the inaugural H.T. Smith Symposium on Civil Rights in Florida (<https://events.miami.edu/event/inaugural-ht-smith-symposium-on-civil-rights-in-florida>), an event named in honor of the esteemed attorney, civil rights leader, and community advocate.

Smith has played a pivotal role in shaping the legal and social landscape of South Florida. A Miami native and graduate of Florida A&M University and Miami Law, he broke barriers early in his career as Miami-Dade County's first Black assistant public defender and its first Black assistant county attorney. He later established the first Black-owned law firm in downtown Miami, specializing in criminal defense, civil rights, and personal injury. In addition, the first building at the University of Miami named after Black alumni (<https://news.miami.edu/stories/2022/03/in-a-milestone-occasion-university-dedicates-its-student-services-building.html>) bears his name along with fellow law grad Harold Long, J.D. '71.

The H.T. Smith Symposium on Civil Rights in Florida

For the Center for Ethics and Public Service, the timing of this gathering could not have been more urgent. The event was designed as a comprehensive gathering to bridge the gap between civil rights theory and practice and to discuss the education and motivation of the next generation of civil rights lawyers.

"The purpose of the H.T. Smith Symposium is not only to honor the living legacy of H.T.'s historic civil rights leadership but also to enlarge civil rights education and research in the law school curriculum and, equally important, build a broader and deeper civil rights alumni bar and bench to better serve unrepresented and underrepresented communities in Florida," said Professor Anthony Alfieri (<https://people.miami.edu/profile/e1fdf9c72da22a7e050d54aff6beef75>), director of CEPS and holder of the Michael R. Klein Distinguished Scholar Chair.

The symposium began with a keynote address by Smith, who currently serves on the University of Miami Board of Trustees and as the director of Florida International University College of Law's Trial Advocacy Program. Smith, whose storied career serves as the very foundation for the symposium, explored the current state of civil rights and the lessons learnt from ongoing struggles for freedom. Smith recounted how, after losing a trial to a female attorney and receiving sexist backlash, he led an effort to incorporate an equal rights amendment to the Florida Constitution. His keynote remarks included a call to action to stand up, speak up, and fight back because "freedom is never won" and "the struggle is a never-ending process."

While the keynote formed the spine of the event, the symposium also featured a thematic roundtable designed to tackle the complex, interconnected reality of modern civil rights work. The panel featured a diverse group of prominent practitioners:

- J. Courtney Cunningham, managing partner of J. Courtney Cunningham, PLLC.
- Alana Greer, co-founder and director of the Community Justice Project.
- Chris Lomax, J.D. '08, managing attorney of Lomax Legal, PLLC.
- Elizabeth Schwartz, J.D. '97, principal of Elizabeth F. Schwartz, PA.

- Ray Taseff, senior attorney at the Florida Justice Institute.

The panelists discussed challenges to fair housing, disability rights, LGBTQ+ students' rights, criminal justice, and voting rights. The panelists, through their experiences, emphasized the important ways that advocates join efforts to defend and uphold civil rights.

The symposium's scope united practitioners, scholars, and students to tackle urgent issues. At the end of the symposium, three individuals were recognized for their career-long dedication to the public good as the 2026 Andrew D. Fredman Friend of the Center awardees: [Michael Haggard \(https://news.miami.edu/law/stories/2022/03/alumni-spotlight-michael-a-haggard-j.d.-95.html\)](https://news.miami.edu/law/stories/2022/03/alumni-spotlight-michael-a-haggard-j.d.-95.html), J.D. '95; [Tiffani Lee \(https://news.miami.edu/law/stories/2024/08/tiffani-lee-fathers-fight-for-justice-seeded-path-to-daughters-success.html\)](https://news.miami.edu/law/stories/2024/08/tiffani-lee-fathers-fight-for-justice-seeded-path-to-daughters-success.html), J.D. '97; and Alexander Rundlet of Rundlet Advisory.

"The 2026 recipients of the Center's annual Andrew D. Fredman Friend of the Center Award embody the deep commitment to civil rights and long dedication to civic leadership Andrew demonstrated across decades of pro bono service both locally and nationally," said Alfieri. "Miami Law graduates Michael Haggard and Tiffani Lee lead law firms distinguished by their professionalism and public service, and [Alexander Rundlet, through his past teaching \(https://news.miami.edu/law/stories/2022/11/alexander-rundlet-joins-ceps.html\)](https://news.miami.edu/law/stories/2022/11/alexander-rundlet-joins-ceps.html) and present advocacy, exemplifies the best public traditions of the legal profession."

Following the symposium, a reception allowed student attendees to continue the dialogue with community activists and faculty in a more informal setting.

In a region where civic leadership is vital, the event was more than an academic exercise. It was a powerful reaffirmation of the importance of dialogue in shaping the future of civil rights in Florida.

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