



NATIONAL NATIVE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION

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Indian Civil Rights Attorney Receives Distinguished Thurgood Marshall Award



Lawrence Baca was honored by the American Bar Association's Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities Saturday night during the ABA Annual Convention. On Saturday night, during one of the hallmark events of the ABA Annual Convention, Lawrence Baca became the first Native American to receive the prestigious Thurgood Marshall Award. Baca is a retired U.S. Department of Justice civil rights litigator and a former Chairman of the ABA Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession, and the first and only Native American to hold that post.

Mary Smith, President-Elect of the National Native American Bar Association and a current member of the ABA Board of Governors noted that, "The time was right to honor Lawrence for his career-long commitment to defending and advancing civil rights. He is a trailblazer not only for Indian Country, but for all of those seeking to right injustices."

Baca, a Pawnee Indian, grew up in Southern California and experienced race discrimination from an early age. These experiences framed his desire to fight for justice for Indians, becoming the first Native American lawyer hired by the Civil Rights Division of the United States Department of Justice and ultimately receiving the U.S. Attorney General's Medallion – the highest honor the Attorney General can present to retiring DOJ employees.

Because of the discrimination he faced by the bench during his first civil rights case in 1978, Baca developed a strategy to avoid trial in order to obtain positive results for Native American victims. During his 32-year tenure as a litigator at the Department of Justice, he never went to trial, but he did not shy away from litigation. During his acceptance speech, Baca explained, "I had the opportunity to pursue justice with the power and authority of the Department of Justice. You rise in court, you speak your name and then the five most powerful words in civil rights enforcement - I represent the United



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States." Using this power, he initiated and resolved more civil rights cases on behalf of Indians than any other government attorney. Baca's actions had ripple effects throughout Indian country on issues ranging from education to lending. His work has not only led to significant advancements for Indian Country, but the United States as a whole.

During his honoring ceremony, Baca noted the continued disparity in the legal profession for Native American lawyers. There continue to be no Native Americans serving on the federal bench, and Baca is advocating for a change because federal courts are responsible for the body of law affecting tribal nations. Since retirement, Baca continues to advocate for change to improve the profession and to support the entry of Native American attorneys into the judicial pipeline. He is a three-time past-President of the National Native American Bar Association and currently serves on the Executive Board and the Judiciary Committee. Baca is also the first Native American to serve as the President of the Federal Bar Association and is a member of the FBA's Indian Law Section Board. In 2008, he was the first recipient of the eponymous Lawrence R. Baca Lifetime Achievement Award for Excellence in Federal Indian Law from the FBA.

Baca received his JD from Harvard Law School in 1976, and that same year was a Lecturer at the Harvard Extension Program, regarding the relatively nascent area of legal practice now known as federal Indian law. He later taught Indian law at Howard University School of Law and the American University College of Law. Baca published several articles regarding issues of Native American civil rights, in journals such as *Howard Law Journal* and the *University of Illinois Law Review*. His many other awards for his lifetime of achievement include the Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of California Santa Barbara (where he received his B.A. in American Indian History); and the Spirit of Excellence Award by the ABA Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession.

Today, Lawrence is retired, living in San Diego with his wife of 40 years, JoAnn. He is an avid photographer of Native American rock art and enjoys travel.

The Thurgood Marshall Award is named for United States Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, who epitomized individual commitment, in word and action, to the cause of civil rights in this country. The award is intended to recognize similar long-term contributions by other members of the legal profession to the advancement of civil rights, civil liberties, and human rights in the United States. Justice Marshall received the inaugural award in 1992. Justice Marshall's leading Indian law cases include *Santa Clara Pueblo v. Martinez*, upholding tribal sovereignty in determining tribal membership, and *McClanahan v. Arizona Tax Commission*, holding that states do not have jurisdiction to impose tax on income derived by Indians living and working on the reservation.