

Conference on Democracy
Screening of *The Soul of Justice*. and an On-stage discussion with Thelton Henderson
Thursday, October 12, D-Block (8:00 – 9:20)
The MA Theater

A Brief Biography of Thelton Henderson
By Kelsey Shell

Thelton Henderson was born in Shreveport, Louisiana on November 28, 1933, but spent the majority of his childhood in Los Angeles, California. He attended University of California-Berkeley where he cemented his interest in black history. After a two-year period in the US army, Henderson became the first African American lawyer in the US Department Of Justice, Civil Rights Division. His job was to look into the way black people were treated on a local level in the South varying from voting rights to racially founded assassinations. During this time, he investigated into landmark cases such as the 16th Street Baptist Church Birmingham bombings, in which four innocent girls were killed, and the assassination of civil rights activist Medgar Evers.

Through his time spent in the South investigating cases of injustice, he became friends with many civil rights movement leaders. On occasion, when in the South, he was beaten, regardless of his governmental position, on the basis of his race. One fateful day, his friend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asked for a ride because his car had broken down. He was headed for the paramount Selma march. Henderson complied, lending his car to the leader. Because of this favor, Henderson appeared biased and therefore not fit to be an attorney at such a high level. He was dismissed from the Department of Justice because he was standing up for what was right. This opposition to his decisions would continue to be theme throughout Thelton Henderson's life.

After his time in the Department of Justice, Henderson became a private lawyer, was an administrator at Stanford, and started a law firm. In 1980, he was appointed as a judge in The United States Federal Court system for Northern California. From this position he made numerous controversial rulings. The first of these cases was the destruction of Proposition 209, set out to ban affirmative action plans in California education institutions. This case enraged many republicans who set out to have him impeached from his position, to no avail. Next he placed California's prison health system under control of the Federal Government in hopes of improving health care for inmates. This move from state's rights to Federal control once again upset many republicans who firmly believe in state's rights. Lastly, he ruled against the tuna companies in a 1990's case that required tuna fisheries and the federal government to follow certain fishing guidelines to protect dolphins.

Throughout his career, Thelton Henderson has fought against injustice towards all people (and creatures), regardless of whether it made him popular with the public or not. He is a judge with a strong sense of right and wrong. Yet more importantly, he is a human being who is willing to stand up against all odds, against any opposition to do what he believes in.

On-line Resources:

Further Biographical Information:

<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/Henderson/henderson-bio.html>

In Conversation:

<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/Henderson/henderson-con0.html>

About the film, *The Soul of Justice*:

<http://www.newsreel.org/nav/title.asp?tc=CN0182>

<http://www.law.berkeley.edu/news/gallery/2006/henderson/index.html>

On Environmental Protection:

<http://www.mindfully.org/Water/2004/Bush-Weaken-Dolphin%20Protection9aug04.htm>

His critics:

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1282/is_n2_v49/ai_19100528/print