

Law center to honor chief judge

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Bell is praised for improving access to legal system

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SUN STAFF

Exactly 37 years ago, the Supreme Court ordered Maryland's highest court to review the case of some civil rights demonstrators arrested in Baltimore for refusing to leave a whites-only restaurant.

Next week, one of those demonstrators will receive an award for his efforts to promote a lesson learned in that case.

Robert M. Bell, chief judge

of the state's highest court, will be honored Tuesday by the Pro Bono Resource Center of Baltimore for his efforts to improve access to the legal system.

The case of Bell vs. Maryland became a footnote in legal history and helped Bell see that the courts can work for rich and poor alike.

"I've always believed that the courts are there to ensure justice and equality," Bell said yesterday. "As a youngster having that experience and looking at the system from that perspective, I know how important it is for people to feel the courts are there for them."

The case attracted a star-studded legal defense team that in-



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Robert M. Bell, Court of Appeals chief judge, says "the courts are there to ensure justice and equality."

City pro bono center to honor Chief Judge Bell

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cluded Thurgood Marshall, who became the nation's first black Supreme Court justice; Robert B. Watts, who became the city's first black Municipal Court judge; and Juanita Jackson Mitchell, the state's first black female lawyer.

Marshall and Mitchell handled the appeal after Bell and 11 other students were convicted of trespassing for taking part in a June 17, 1960, sit-in at Hooper's, a restaurant at Charles and Fayette streets. Sit-ins at Hooper's continued throughout the summer and spread to other downtown restaurants, crowding the city jail with those arrested.

The judgments against Bell and the other students were reversed in 1965, well after the Supreme Court ruled June 22, 1964.

In a 5-4 decision written by Justice William J. Brennan, the court stopped short of considering the merits of the case. But the court directed the Maryland Court of Appeals to reconsider the convictions in light of city and state laws enacted after the arrests that made it illegal to deny public accommodations based on race.

Bell, a student government

president at Dunbar High School at the time of the arrest, seldom thinks about the case these days.

But he said it produced a personal highlight in his legal career when he met Brennan 10 years ago. Brennan remembered the case and didn't mind discussing it, Bell said.

"He said he was disappointed that the [Supreme] Court wasn't able to decide the case on the merits," Bell said.

As the Court of Appeals chief judge since 1996, Bell has won praise for his efforts to open up the legal system. "He's been a tremendous advocate and source of support," said Sharon E. Goldsmith, executive director of the Pro Bono Resource Center, a clearinghouse for free legal services.

Bell said that making the courts accessible is the best way to ensure public confidence in them.

"We have to make sure the system is accessible. It's our mandate," Bell said. "As an added bonus, I think it does increase public confidence in the system."

Bell will receive the center's Access to Justice Tribute award at a dinner at 6 p.m. Tuesday at the Center Club, 100 Light St. Goldsmith said it is the second time the

center, founded in 1990, has given the award. The first award went to Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin in 1996.

Goldsmith said that when Bell learned that the amount of free legal services declined in 1998, he set up a judicial commission to encourage more volunteer work.

She and others credit Bell with promoting mediation programs to resolve disputes without court action and setting up a Family Court system accessible to nonlawyers that can handle such issues as domestic violence complaints and custody disputes.

Robert J. Rhudy, executive director of Maryland Legal Services Corp., said Bell persuaded the General Assembly to enact a law in 1998 setting aside a portion of the filing fees paid for District and Circuit courts civil cases to fund pro bono activities.

About \$2.4 million of the MLSC's \$7 million annual budget comes from that fund and is used for grants to 25 legal aid groups.

Rhudy added that Bell's willingness in 1998 to oversee the Maryland Legal Assistance Network, a fledgling program to coordinate legal aid resources statewide, helped secure a \$1 million private grant.