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Introduction of Professor Derrick Bell

5 June 2003

Law and Society Association Annual Meeting

Pittsburgh, PA

Thank you, Laurie.

Before I introduce our speaker, I would like to add a welcome on behalf of the program committee. We are delighted to see all of you here. I hope that during the meeting you will have the chance to thank the committee members for their hard work over the past year.

As many of you already know, I was born in Pittsburgh. I lived in Pittsburgh until I went off to college. While in college, I met a woman from Pittsburgh, and later married her. Pittsburgh, you'll find, has a way of sticking with you.

As a native Pittsburgher, I would like to say that I am personally delighted that the Law and Society Association is meeting here. I'd also like to offer a wee bit of historical and social context for the meeting—and also for our plenary speaker.

Consider this hotel. The William Penn Hotel opened in 1916. The industrialist Henry Clay Frick built the hotel. Henry Clay Frick was Andrew Carnegie's right-hand man. Frick was the man who locked out the Homestead workers in 1892, precipitating the bloody clash that we call the Homestead strike. Frick became president of US Steel in 1901. Later in his life, Frick turned to philanthropy as did Carnegie. Frick amassed a great art collection and donated his house, which is now the Frick museum in New York City.

The William Penn Hotel was a hotel for industrialists, business men, and captains of industry. Or, to use a different historical term, the William Penn was a hotel for plutocrats. On the day the hotel opened, the Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce held a big banquet in the ballroom upstairs where we will soon gather for a reception. The banquet was the largest ever assembled up to that point in Pittsburgh's history, with a variety of business men and politicians, including Ohio Senator Warren Harding, who would later become the 29th president.

[pause]

In 1916—the year that this hotel opened—Ada Elizabeth Childress was six years old. Ada Childress was an African-American girl living in a black neighborhood just east of here. The neighborhood is known as the “Hill District” or, simply, as “The Hill.” Ada Childress's father owned a house on Hooper St., about one-half mile from here. From that spot, Childress and her family could watch the William Penn hotel rise into the sky during its construction.

The years around 1916 were especially bad ones for African Americans. There were numerous large urban anti-black riots during these years. Two months after this hotel opened, thousands of people watched Jesse Washington, a black man, as he was burned alive in the town square in Waco. In 1915, the Ku Klux Klan had been reborn, and that same year, D.W. Griffith released his powerful racist film “Birth of a Nation.” Outmigration from the South by African Americans increased, with quite a number of blacks settling on The Hill, hoping to find things different and better in Pittsburgh.

Henry Clay Frick would never have imagined that Ada Childress, the young black girl I mentioned, might have a son who would one day deliver a talk in his William Penn Hotel. The more than 800 captains of industry who gathered for the Chamber of Commerce banquet on this hotel's opening night could not have imagined that a boy who would be born in the Hill District would some day speak to a packed William Penn ballroom at a conference that included a diverse crowd of more than 900 legal scholars from around the world. In 1916, those who gathered at the opening of this hotel and those who stayed in this hotel thought of the black residents of the The Hill only as possible hired help.

Just at the start of the Great Depression, Ada Childress and her husband Al Bell had a baby boy, whom they named Derrick Albert Bell, Jr. The young couple and their infant son lived for a while with her parents in the Hooper St. house within view of the William Penn.

(At around the same time, in another part of town, my wife's grandmother arrived from Sicily. And further down the river, my own father was born two years after Derrick Bell.)

When beginning to plan this meeting, Derrick Bell was my first and best choice for a plenary speaker. He's a world-class scholar and he's a Pittsburgh native. I'm delighted to have the chance to introduce him to you.

After being brought home to Hooper St. as an infant, Bell grew up in very modest surroundings. He was the first of his family to go to college, and Duquesne University graduated him in 1952. The Duquesne campus now includes the site of his grandfather's house.

After college, Derrick Bell served as a lieutenant in the United States Air Force. He was stationed in Louisiana, and there, among other things, he integrated the choir of the local Presbyterian church.

Following his Air Force stint, Bell returned to Pittsburgh and enrolled in the University of Pittsburgh's law school with the intention of becoming a civil rights lawyer. He graduated in 1957, ranked fourth in the class.

Bell then joined the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division. He was the lone African-American attorney on a staff of 1,000. When his bosses at the Department of Justice asked Bell to give up his two-dollar membership in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Bell refused. He quit that job.

After leaving the Justice Department, Bell again came back to Pittsburgh—I mentioned that Pittsburgh sticks with those of us who were born here—where he became executive secretary of the local NAACP branch. After 1960, Bell worked with Thurgood Marshall at the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund, handling hundreds of school desegregation cases.

Derrick Bell began teaching in law schools in 1967 at the University of Southern California. He went from there to Harvard Law School, where he earned tenure in 1971.

In the mid-1980s, Bell took a leave from Harvard and went to the University of Oregon to serve as dean of the law school. After the Oregon faculty refused to allow him to offer a spot to an Asian-American woman, he quit that job.

Back to Harvard in 1986. In 1990, when Harvard refused to offer a tenured spot to an African-American woman, Bell took a two-year leave in protest. He quit that job, too.

Professor Bell discusses his career and life choices in his most recent book, *Ethical Ambition*, which he will discuss tomorrow morning in an Author Meets Readers session.

Richard Delgado, Lauren Edelman, Tracey Meares, Frank Valdez, and Julian Webb will discuss his book.

Professor Bell is the author of seven other books, including *Race, Racism, and American Law*, now in its fourth edition. In 1992, he published two books: *And We are Not Saved* and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*. He published two more in 1996: *Gospel Choirs* and *Confronting Authority: Reflections of an Ardent Protester*. In 1997, he published an introductory constitutional law text called *Constitutional Conflicts*, and the following year, *Afrolantica Legacies*.

Professor Bell's talk today, titled _____, is from his forthcoming book *The Perfect Precedent: Brown v. Board of Education as Magnificent Mirage*.

Friends and Colleagues, I am very pleased to introduce to the 2003 annual meeting of the Law and Society Association one of the world's leading legal scholars and one of Pittsburgh's native sons, from New York University School of Law, Professor Derrick A. Bell.