

## The Law Place Scholarship

It was by pure coincidence that the power had gone out the day I would meet my legal hero. I had been warned that he was intimidating, but I had no idea how to heed that admonition. In a pitch-black classroom at 7:25 A.M. on a Monday morning, I first encountered my legal hero: Samuel Stafford. Professor Stafford's reputation preceded him on various fronts, but specifically he was known for having served as a Legal Hearing Officer for 31 years, an adjunct law professor at the University of Florida for 10 years, and an undergraduate legal studies professor for an additional 33 years. Professor Stafford's dedication to the law and willingness to sacrifice his time for his students is why I consider him to be my legal hero; he ignited a flame inside me, burning with the desire to protect American's civil liberties, safeguard the Constitution, and use legal precedent to learn from the mistakes of our ancestors.

A full-time employee of the court, Professor Stafford was infamous for scheduling all three of his undergraduate courses at 7:25 in the morning. Moreover, he made it abundantly clear to his students that we were not to bring any food or drinks into the classroom, including coffee. He treated the classroom like a courtroom, and used the Socratic method to call on students at random. Opposite his infamy, the 70-year-old legal scholar was celebrated for his dedication to his students. Professor Stafford would hold office hours twice a week until 10 P.M., despite the fact that he had to return to the university by his regularly scheduled morning class time. He assigned hundreds of case briefs to all three of his courses, along with 36-page research papers, which he would grade himself and make detailed comments. Unsure as to whether law was my true passion, I signed up for all three of Professor Stafford's undergraduate courses in order to investigate further. The classes in the order I took them are titled, "American Civil Liberties," "Constitutional Law," and "Race and the Law."

In the first of these courses, Professor Stafford taught me the importance of protecting civil liberties and knowing one's rights. "American Civil Liberties" was the first ever strictly-legal course that I took, and despite it being the most rigorous and time-consuming class I have encountered to this day, I absolutely loved it. Cases such as *Miranda v. Arizona* and *Florida v. Bostick* taught me the basic principles of a citizen's rights when facing law enforcement officials, and were amongst the first Supreme Court opinions I ever read. It was in reading and briefing these sorts of cases that I first developed a passion for safeguarding citizen's rights against overarching government officials. This is not to say that law enforcement is always in the wrong, rather, to emphasize the importance of checking our government officials and ensuring that a balance of freedom and safety is being upheld. Professor Stafford used a well-structured teaching method to expose my classmates and I to what was likely all of our first glances into the historical underpinnings of where our civil liberties are rooted.

Equally as important, Professor Stafford went out of his way to schedule jail tours and tours of UF's Law School Library for all of his students. As a mere 19-year-old, the alleys of a jail woke me up to the realities of some people's lives; but as I strolled the floors of UF's Law Library, a sense of power to help other people washed over me. The mixed emotions of nervous yet confident felt new to me, yet I couldn't help but long for more of it. Professor Stafford gave me the opportunity to peek through a small hole and have a sense of what I am sure many attorneys feel on a weekly basis.

During the next two semesters, I dove headfirst into an abyss of early mornings with Professor Stafford, and countless essays. "Constitutional Law" opened my eyes to the different perspectives people may take on interpreting the Constitution, from a strict constructionist to a more liberal pragmatic interpretation. We continued to look at Supreme Court opinions in order

to examine how the Constitution was interpreted in its early years, and how it has been interpreted since. Professor Stafford always reminded the class that wherever the Constitution is not present, there may likely be a judge attempting to legislate from the bench.

In my final semester with Professor Stafford, we explored the role of race in the United States legal system. Based completely off of Supreme Court case law, Professor Stafford exposed my classmates and I to the ups and downs of historical racism and how the Court has ruled on such cases. In a chronological manner, we observed the evolution of Court rulings, from the “separate but equal” doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson* to the affirmative action rulings of the Kennedy era, to present. From a non-political perspective, Professor Stafford used race in the United States to teach my classmates and I that case law often depicts history in the most accurate manner. Case law shows how the Court ruled in a specific time-period and how the United States has shifted in its short 250-year lifespan.

Over the course of 3 semesters, or roughly 500 days, Professor Stafford opened my mind to a whole new world of legal interpretation. I have always considered myself a lawyer at heart, eager to serve others and passionate to defend the law. However, it was not until Professor Stafford strategically utilized case law and a strong dedication to his students that I truly knew my calling was to defend the letter of the law. Professor Stafford is my legal hero due to his dedication to the law and willingness to sacrifice his time for his students. Professor Stafford inspired me to always seek to protect American’s civil liberties, to rely on the Constitution, and to use case law in order to historically examine the United States legal system.