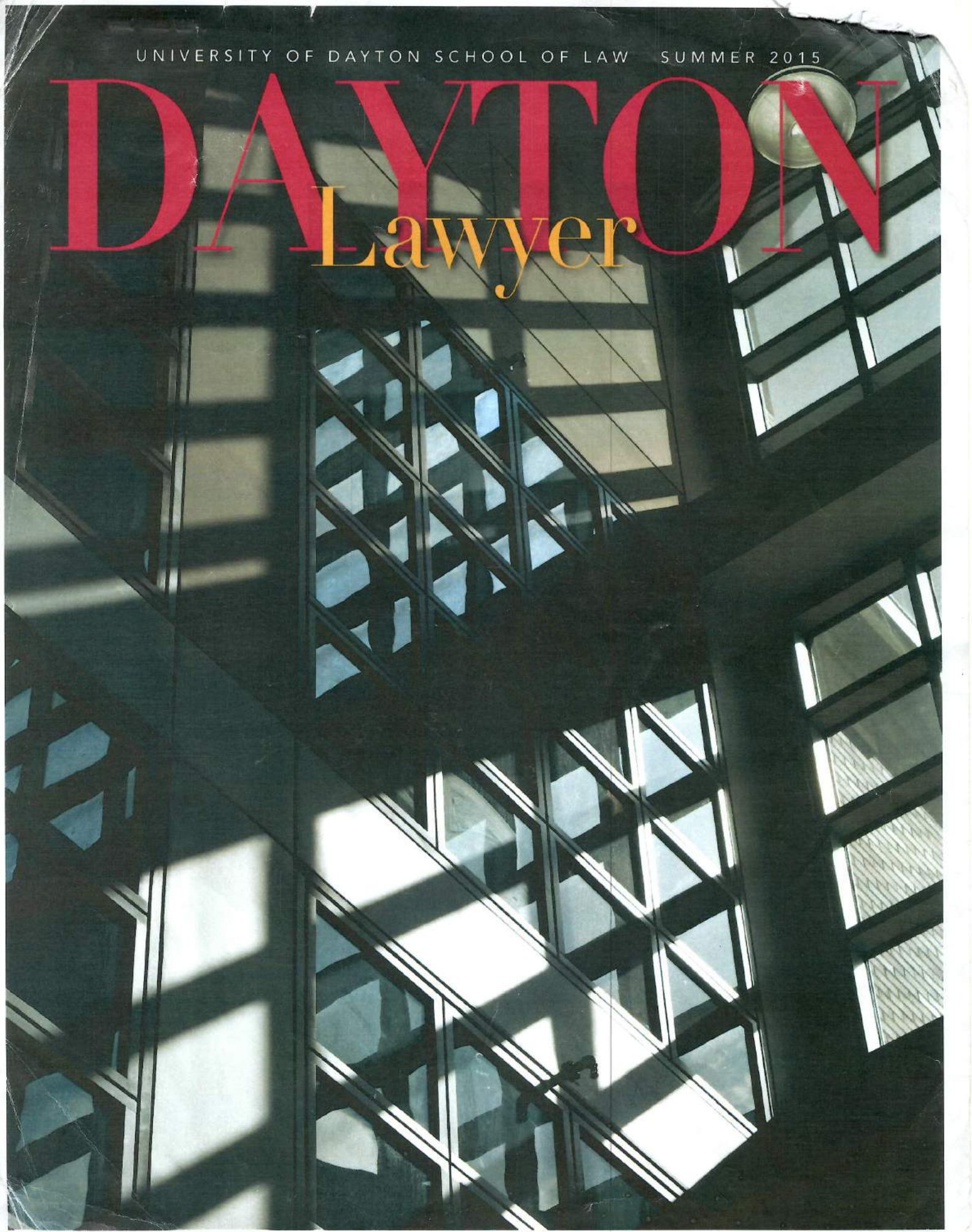


UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON SCHOOL OF LAW SUMMER 2015

# DAYTON

Lawyer



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MICHAEL B. COLEMAN '80 is the longest-serving mayor in the history of Columbus, Ohio. As he prepares to step down from his position at the end of the year, he looks forward to reaching back to the place he credits for his successful career in public service — the University of Dayton School of Law.

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By SHANNON SHELTON MILLER

# SOLID FOUNDATION

**I**n 1979, a University of Dayton School of Law student sent a letter to the White House asking the president of the United States for a summer job.

President Jimmy Carter, or, more likely, an assistant in charge of opening his mail, wrote the young man back. If he could get to Washington, D.C., for an in-person interview, the note said, that request would be considered.

Michael B. Coleman '80 was thrilled, but two obstacles stood in his way. He had limited funds to support himself as a student living and working in Dayton, and didn't know if he could afford the gas to get to D.C. and back. Then there was the car itself, a green Ford Pinto — “you know, the kind that blows up” — that had to transport him 7 to 8 hours to the nation's capital and get him back in one piece.

Coleman says some professors and friends loaned him the money for the trip, and “I filled up the gas tank in a car that explodes upon impact, and I drove my little green Pinto to interview at the White House.”

The Pinto did its job. Coleman secured a position as a summer law clerk in the Carter White House, an experience that cemented his desire to use his legal education to pursue a career in public service. Twenty years later, that career reached a pinnacle when he was elected mayor of Columbus, Ohio, in 1999.

After serving four terms, the longest tenure in city history, Coleman, 60, announced in late 2014 that he would not seek a fifth term as mayor, making this year his last at the helm of Ohio's capital city. Observers have asked Coleman about his interest in a higher office, such as governor or senator, but he says he's not considering another political position.

He doesn't, however, plan to retreat from community service, a decision that could have him spending more time in the place that began preparing him for civic life.

“The School of Law gave a good foundation for me to do what I'm doing now and getting me the skills I needed to have as I moved on in life,” Coleman says. “I'd love to see the University of Dayton and Mike Coleman have a strong connection.”

#### A NEW LANGUAGE

Coleman, an Indianapolis native who grew up in Toledo, graduated with his bachelor's degree in political science from

the University of Cincinnati in 1977, and decided he wanted to stay in Ohio for his legal studies. Uninterested in returning to Toledo or going to Cleveland, two of the regions where he had applied to law school, he set his sights on Dayton.

On his first day of class, he wondered if he'd made a mistake.

“My first class was civil procedure — it was scary,” Coleman says. “I had very little exposure to the language of

the law, the language of courts, those Latin words. It was like going to a foreign country without having any exposure to that country and language and being required to speak the language on that first day. The teacher started asking questions immediately of the class members, and I was hoping and praying he wouldn't call on me because I didn't know anything about anything. It was pretty nerve-racking.”

Dennis Turner, now professor emeritus, taught that course and remembers starting the class by introducing *Pennoyer v. Neff*, a case considered seminal in civil procedure courses.

“I walk into the class, with no ‘who's whos,’ no introductions and just start asking, ‘Who's Pennoyer? Who's Neff?’” Turner said. “I definitely used the Socratic method — I guess that can be intimidating.”



*Best wishua to Michael Coleman*

*Jimmy Carter*

Coleman, the intern, meets President Carter.



*Coleman attends a groundbreaking in Columbus.*

Coleman survived civil procedure in fall 1977 and the great blizzard of January 1978, which trapped him in his small off-campus apartment for days.

“There was just a TV, a little desk and a couch that pulled out from the wall to become a bed,” he says. “And there was a kitchenette — not a kitchen, but a kitchenette. And a little shower in the corner.”

He laughs when he talks about that living space, a small studio about half the size of his second-floor office at Columbus City Hall. In that office, complete with plush couches where he completes interviews, meets with visitors and holds informal conferences, Coleman displays reminders of his journey to City Hall, from an image of him meeting with President Carter to a photo of Margaret Dean, the great-grandmother he never met.

Dean holds a place of honor in Coleman's office, as her picture on the wall overlooks the city seal embedded in the floor, and faces a collage of some of Coleman's key moments as mayor — an election night celebration, a commencement speech at The Ohio State University. The photo placement is deliberate, Coleman says. Born a slave in Virginia in 1839, Dean lived to experience emancipation and decades of life as a free woman in Kentucky. She died in 1941 at 103, 13 years before Coleman was born.

"She was uneducated and never voted in an election," Coleman says. "To have her see her great-grandson become the mayor of a major city ... it's symbolic."

Coleman didn't envision himself as a politician when he attended UD, although he knew public service was in his future. While in school, he worked in a law firm with attorney Richard Austin, then president of the Dayton Unit NAACP, and for Alice O. McCollum, the first woman to serve as a judge of the Dayton Municipal Court and an assistant professor at UDSL, to learn more about the judicial system. Civil procedure, the course that haunted his first semester at the School of Law, came in handy, he says, as he was able to apply what he learned in the classroom to real life.

As much as he enjoyed learning about the judicial process and meeting members of the legal community in Dayton, Coleman says he didn't see practicing law as a long-term plan. A law degree would be crucial to his goal of becoming a public servant, but he didn't know exactly how that degree would get him there.

A few years later, his little green Pinto helped steer him in the right direction.

### CHANGE AGENT

Coleman knew the White House job would be a "longshot gamble," he says, but he was inspired by a college friend, Tyrone

Yates, who'd also written to Washington, D.C., in search of a summer job.

Both were hired and spent the summer of 1979 in the nation's capital. Coleman stayed with family friends near Rock Creek Park in the city's northwest quadrant, but sometimes he failed to return at the end of the day. A couch in the Executive Office Building became his favorite place to rest his head.



*Coleman's work with the people of Columbus will be part of his legacy.*

"I brought my toothbrush, washcloth ... I just soaked it up," Coleman says. "I got a lot of wonderful experiences, although brief, but they lasted a long time, even until this day. I was exposed to national leaders, to great men and women, jurists, judges, politicians, senators, Cabinet members, even the president himself. It was a marvelous experience, and I didn't want to leave."

Yates, now a Hamilton County (Ohio) Municipal Court judge, says they often saw President Carter four to five times a day in passing, an experience that thrilled the two legal interns. The connections they made left lasting impressions and created bonds that remain strong today.

"We consider ourselves like brothers," Yates says. "I knew Michael would be outstanding at whatever he did. He's a natural leader, and he gets along with everyone. He's a consensus builder."

The exposure both had to movers and shakers in the Washington political scene provided the final piece to the puzzle Coleman was solving in his own mind — how one could use a law degree to become a public servant.

"Almost everyone I met in Washington was a lawyer, and I really had the opportunity to get a better understanding that earning a law degree isn't just about practicing the law in the corporate arena," Coleman says. "Your knowledge and skill development in law school can be applied on a much grander stage. I came out of that experience in the White House saying that I really wanted to go into some level of public service where I could impact more



*Coleman and First Lady Michelle Obama*

than just a client, but maybe a neighborhood. A city. A state. A nation. The world. Who knows?"

#### **DEFINING HIS LEGACY**

After graduation, Coleman moved to Columbus and held positions in the state attorney general's office and as a legislative aide for Columbus City Council member Ben Espy. He also completed a stint in private sector, working for the law firm of Schottenstein Zox & Dunn, LPA, from 1984 to 1997. In 1992, Coleman won a seat on the Columbus City Council and had a two-year juncture as City Council president from 1997-99. When he won his campaign for mayor in 1999, he became the first Democrat elected to the position since 1972 and the first African-American mayor in city

history. He is currently the longest-serving incumbent African-American mayor in the United States.

Observers have praised the economic and population growth that took place during Coleman's tenure as mayor, helping Columbus emerge relatively unscathed from the late 2000s recession that rocked other Ohio and Midwestern cities. Columbus frequently appears in newspaper, magazine and other media "best cities" lists as one of the nation's top places for quality of life, cost of living, education, diversity and business support, among others.

He's enjoyed bipartisan political support for his initiatives throughout the region and the state and has been praised for his emphasis on building coalitions with community leaders, residents and the business sector to strengthen neighborhoods and down-



Coleman: "The city is a very different city from when I took over in 1999."

town as desirable places for citizens to live, work and play.

"I'll leave legacies to those around me, and after I leave, they can make those decisions," Coleman says when asked about the accomplishments of which he's most proud. "Look at my record, look around and see what changes have taken place. I can't pick my legacy, but I think there will be plenty to choose from. The city is a very different city from when I took over in 1999. It speaks for itself."

Yates, the Cincinnati judge and Coleman's longtime friend, is more than willing to speak about Columbus' success under Coleman's leadership.

"He's leaving Columbus in its finest position ever as a city," Yates says. "Columbus is at the height of its population, prosperity and civic life. He's been the spark plug for that."

Pundits have floated his name as a possible candidate for a higher office, and, although Coleman has hinted in past interviews that he might consider running for another public position once he leaves office, he said in April that was not his current plan.

"I have no intention for running for political office. That's the one thing I've ruled out," Coleman says. "But after 23 years as an elected official, I feel I can make change without being an elected official. I think I've grown enough where I can provide the guid-

ance to other people to make change in that way. ... if they want to listen to me."

He'll be 61 when he leaves office and says he's got plenty of energy left for his next career move, one in which he "fully intends" to be engaged in the community and "continue to be a change agent."

That could include a greater connection to UD. The School of Law honored him with its Distinguished Alumni Award in 2005, and Coleman says he wants to spend more time working with the University and helping with outreach efforts to the greater Dayton community.

"It's time to reconnect with the law school and see how it's doing with minority students, international students, to see how UD has shaped leadership characteristics of students and how the University has integrated with the needs of the community," Coleman says. "I'm sure there are a lot of needs in the Dayton area the University could help.

"The School of Law gave me a good foundation to do what I'm doing now and get me the skills I needed to have as I moved on in life, and provide a good, solid education," he says. "The University of Dayton is who I am. The School of Law is who I am. It's undeniable." ■