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2009-08-03 H. Thomas Wells, Jr. ABA Presidential Speech

H. Thomas Wells Jr.

University of Alabama School of Law

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Note that Gates prefers not to use Jr. or Sr. after his name.

The American Bar Association today confers upon William H. Gates its highest honor, the American Bar Association Medal. The Medal was first awarded 79 years ago, and it honors those who have given conspicuous service to the cause of American jurisprudence.

Bill Gates began his legal career in private practice with a ^{lawyer}~~practitioner~~ who doubled as the city attorney for Bremerton, Washington.

Later, he joined a prominent Seattle firm, and 12 years after that he joined the firm of Shidler, McBroom & Gates. With Bill serving as managing partner, the firm grew and its clients prospered. The firm now known as K&L Gates is a top-tier, international law firm with 1,800 lawyers practicing in 33 offices on three continents.

While deeply involved in building a law practice and guiding his firm, he carved out time to serve the profession and the public through a variety of leadership roles. He served as president of

**the Seattle-King County Bar Association,
the Washington State Bar Association,
and the National Conference of Bar
Presidents.**

**He has long been active in the
American Bar Association, serving in the
ABA House of Delegates for 13 years, and
on the Committee on Lawyers'
Professional Liability for 12 years,
including three as its chair. He also
chaired the ABA Commission on Public
Understanding About the Law.**

**Bill Gates has long been a leader in
promoting excellence on the bench. He**

served on the ABA Standing Committee on the Federal Judiciary. He served on the Board of Trustees of the National Center for State Courts. He has been called upon repeatedly by governors of the State of Washington to chair commissions on state courts and served on the state Supreme Court's Board for Judicial Administration. In 1992, the American Judicature Society presented him with its Herbert Harley Award, their premier ~~state~~ award for individuals or entities that make outstanding efforts and

contributions to improve the administration of justice.

A lifelong champion of access to legal services for the underprivileged, Bill became active in pro bono work as a young attorney and served on the Board of Trustees of the Seattle Legal Aid Bureau at a time before government funding for legal services. He co-chaired the Washington Campaign for Equal Justice, helping to raise private funds for indigent legal services. He also chaired the state bar's Long-Range Planning Committee (known as the "Gates

Commission"), and it identified access to justice as the number one issue facing the state bar.

Another area where Bill was ahead of his time involved his efforts to make the profession more inclusive. While president of the King County Bar Association, he overcame considerable member opposition to the trustees' efforts to inaugurate and underwrite the Minority Law Student Program at the University of Washington Law School. He supported efforts by young lawyers to open the proceedings of the Washington

State Bar Board of Governors and worked to get younger lawyers elected to the Board.

Bill Gates is a nationally recognized authority on lawyers' professional liability. It was through his early efforts that the ABA became involved in this area, later creating the Standing Committee on Lawyers' Professional Liability. His work in educating lawyers about best practices in discharging their professional responsibilities has been transformative.

Bill and his family share a powerful commitment to education at all levels. The new law school building at the University of Washington is named in his honor, and the William H. Gates Public Service Law Program provides a full scholarship to five scholars in each entering class who agree to practice public interest law for five years following graduation.

His many accomplishments have not been limited to the legal community. After a lengthy and distinguished career in the law, Bill chose not to retire, but to

extend his service to the world community by serving as co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the world's largest private philanthropic institution. As the Foundation's public face, he has traveled the world to identify worthy causes to receive support from the Foundation.

In his recent book, *Showing Up for Life*, Bill shares values and principles learned over his lifetime. In it he says, "I consider myself fortunate because I have always found satisfaction and meaning in the practice of law. A love of law isn't

about a statute book. It's about caring and being enthusiastic about having a just society...I believe in the power of law to help people and change things for the better...."

Bill Gates is a shining star of the legal profession and a living testament to the power of public service.

The presentation of the ABA's highest honor to William H. Gates demonstrates our deep admiration for his outstanding achievements and contributions to the profession.