“Law has been and continues to be a vehicle in which man may move toward greater freedom and individual dignity. I would be very proud of being a part of so noble a profession.”

From Leslie Smith’s Washington and Lee application personal statement.

In 1964, Washington and Lee University was under pressure to desegregate its student body. The Trustees publicly reiterated that no provision of the University’s Charter or By-Laws, nor any resolution of the Board established a policy of discrimination among qualified (at the time, male only) applicants for admission. It became immediately apparent, however, that the University would have to seek out such qualified diverse applicants if integration was to take place. In the Spring of 1966, the University’s student government advocated in favor of the “recruitment of Negro students,” and the student body president personally established a scholarship fund for this purpose.

In 1965, the School of Law extended an offer to a graduate of St. Paul’s College, an all-Black institution in Lawrenceville, Virginia. He chose to attend school elsewhere.

Another St. Paul’s graduate, Leslie Devan Smith Jr., accepted an offer of admission the following year, and matriculated at Washington and Lee University School of Law in September 1966.

Smith received financial assistance from the law school. He resided in Davis Hall, then the law student dormitory, and took his meals at Evans Hall.

In the same year Smith matriculated at the School of Law, Dennis Haston became the first Black student to enroll in the College at Washington and Lee. As one of only two African American students at an otherwise all-white university, Smith was not spared the racist attitudes and behaviors of that time and place. Nevertheless, Smith not only persevered, he thrived. Possessed of even temperament and dry wit, however, he befriended students and faculty alike.

He served as a member of the *Washington and Lee Law Review*, the Student Bar Association, and the Legal Research Association. , Additionally, he served as president Delta Theta Phi, co-editor of the Law School magazine *The Lawyer*, of the Young Democrats Association.

Smith spent his summers during law school working in Washington, DC. On Capitol Hill, he was the first African American to clerk in a Virginia Senate office, as a research aide to Senator William B. Spong, who came to regard Smith as his protégé. He recommended Smith for a clerkship the following summer at the law firm of Steptoe & Johnson.

Smith passed the Virginia State Bar exam the winter before he graduated. At the commencement exercises in June 1969, he was inducted into the school’s chapter of the Order of the Coif.

After graduation, Smith joined the United States Department of Justice, working in the Civil Rights Division. Fittingly, his work involved gaining the compliance of southern school boards with court ordered desegregation.

Tragically, Smith’s promise was not fully realized, as his life was cut short. He was murdered on June 9, 1971 inside his DuPont Circle apartment. He was just 26 years old at the time. The crime remains unsolved.

Smith’s remains are interred in the Oakland Cemetery in his hometown of Chuckatuck, Virginia. His headstone bears the one-word epitaph “Attorney.”

Washington and Lee University School of Law is proud that Leslie D. Smith Jr. achieved his professional status employing the legal education he received here. We are forever grateful to him for leading our school through the challenging process of integration. Our institution is a far stronger because of his courage.

Leslie Smith

Class of 1969

Pioneering African American Law Student

At

Washington and Lee