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Curtis Mack, LLM ’73: Giving Back and Paying It Forward

By Lori Atherton

Back when Curtis Mack, LLM ’73, was just beginning his time at Law School, his mother already wanted to know what he was going to do for the University, he recalls.

“My mother used to say to us, ‘It’s not about what folks give to you or about being successful for yourself; it’s about giving back to others,’” Mack says. “When I came to Michigan Law as a Cooke Fellow, she asked me, ‘What are you going to give back?’”

A self-described “poor farm boy who grew up on the southernmost tip of Georgia,” and whose school was a “tiny African American church started by my ancestors,” Mack says his mother (his father died when he was 18 months old) instilled in him the importance of an education and the value of helping others. He has taken those lessons to heart.

In addition to maintaining an active labor and employment practice at McGuireWoods in Atlanta, Mack gives back through his service to numerous organizations, including the We Are Family and Just the Beginning foundations, where he serves on the boards. An ardent supporter of U-M, he is also an Alumni Association board member and serves on the Law School Development and Alumni Relations Committee.

Mack regularly meets with students, most of whom he hasn’t met previously and who are referred to him, never passing up an opportunity, he says, to share his experiences, highlight the value of a Michigan education, or even help them land a job.

He recently helped a Michigan Law student who wanted to clerk for a federal judge Mack is connected to through the Just the Beginning Foundation. After talking with the student at length about her aspirations and why she wanted the clerkship, Mack was so impressed he put in a good word for her with the judge. The judge, too, was impressed, and hired the student on the spot.

“I feel good about the opportunity to help young folks like that student,” Mack says. “I’ve had such a great life for a kid who had so little. Why can’t I, and why shouldn’t I, have time to help others?”

Years ago, on a flight from Atlanta to Seattle, Mack was chatting with his seatmate when the conversation revealed an unlikely connection. It turned out that Mack’s fellow passenger was the son-in-law of Judge Sam Street Hughes of Lansing, one of Mack’s mentors while he was an undergrad at Michigan State University. Judge Hughes regularly visited Mack at his job in a Sears auto shop, offering advice and support and later writing a recommendation for him when he applied to law school.

“He was one of those great guys who made an impact on my life,” Mack said of the judge, who is one of the reasons Mack pays that help forward through his own mentoring of young people in need of guidance.

“There were so many people who were helpful to me when I was a young man, and I can’t forget that,” says Mack, who also is an adjunct professor of labor law at Michigan Law. “I always thought that if I were ever in a position to help someone, I would.”

Mack says he learned many of those lessons from fellow alum Stuart Dunnings Jr., ’50, whom Mack met as an undergrad at MSU and got to know as a legal processor server for Dunnings’ office. “He was my adviser, mentor, and friend. He quietly demonstrated not only how to be a great lawyer, but taught me how to be an even better person.”