

Honoring the women, the dream

Fannie Lou Hamer Reception recognizes contributions to justice and equal opportunity

By SUSAN GVOZDAS | Special to The Sun

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If it weren't for the lawyers who mentored her, Gloria Wilson Shelton is not sure she would have made it through the University of Baltimore School of Law.

Now the first person of color to chair the American Bar Association's judicial division's lawyers conference, which promotes judicial integrity and public education, Shelton is the one who reaches out to minority law school students. For the past 15 years, she has mentored minority students at her alma mater.

"The first year is the most difficult year," said Shelton, who is chief counsel for the Maryland Automobile Insurance Fund. "That's the make-or-break point."

She is one of six women from Anne Arundel County who will be honored for their contributions to racial justice, equal opportunity and community service during tomorrow's 12th annual Fannie Lou Hamer Reception.

Shirley A. Jones Alexander, Annapolis Alderwoman Sheila M. Finlayson, Irene Butler Hebron, Erica Matthews and Amy J. Seipp of Severn are the other winners of the award named for Hamer, a Mississippi sharecropper who worked to gain voting rights and equal opportunities for minorities.

She won national acclaim when she spoke before the Democratic National Convention in 1964 about being beaten and jailed for trying to register to vote. Her speech crystallized the push for the National Voting Rights Act and was instrumental in its becoming law in 1965.

"It literally changed the complexion and gender of national politics in our country," said Carl O. Snowden, chairman of the board of directors of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Committee Inc., one of the sponsors of the event.

Hamer, who died in 1977, would have been 90 on Oct. 6. Anne Arundel County is the only jurisdiction in Maryland that celebrates her birthday. While Hamer does not have any connections to the county, event organizers saw her life as the example they were looking for to recognize unsung heroes in the community, Snowden said.

This year's event, co-sponsored by St. John's College, is expected to draw nearly 300 people, including U.S. Rep. John Sarbanes and Maryland House Speaker Michael E. Busch.

The honorees serve as role models in their community, said Christopher B. Nelson, president of St. John's College.

"These women have truly made a difference in our community," he said. "Their efforts continue to open doors for others."

Alexander was a personnel management specialist and equal employment opportunity specialist at Fort Meade for more than 25 years before retiring in 2005. As the Historically Black College

program manager, she brought teachers from schools, such as Bowie State University and Hampton University in Virginia, to do internships at Fort Meade.

Alexander served for decades on the county Housing Commission, working on public housing issues. She also has been a member of the Anne Arundel County Minority Business and Women Enterprise Committee.

She said she considers Hamer a powerful role model. "I think it's important that we let people understand that ordinary people can do extraordinary things," she said.

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