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Equal Rights Initiative head Bryan Stevenson wins justice award from the Peter and Patricia Gruber Foundation of New York

Award winner speaks to Cumberland students

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Providing effective legal representation to all is key to overcoming a history of segregation and becoming a just society, Bryan Stevenson, head of the Equal Justice Initiative, told law students Thursday in Birmingham.

Society is not judged by how it treats the rich, educated and connected, "but how it treats the poor, the hated, the condemned, the disfavored," Stevenson said at the Cumberland School of Law at Samford University.

"The system treats you better if you're rich and guilty than if you're poor and innocent," he said.

Stevenson was part of a panel discussing access to justice after receiving an international justice award from the Peter and Patricia Gruber Foundation of New York. He shared the \$500,000 prize with the European Roma Rights Centre, which provides legal advocacy on behalf of the Gypsy population of eastern Europe.

The Gruber Foundation announced the award in June. It cited the work by Stevenson and EJI in winning reversals or sentence reductions in 75 death-penalty cases, training lawyers and seeking sentencing reform in 19 states.

Stevenson said his share will be used to expand beyond the Montgomery-based organization's initial mission to provide legal representation for poor defendants and prisoners. New initiatives will include justice issues involving children, the growing use of incarceration, wrongful convictions and anti-poverty efforts.

The money comes at a good time for the nonprofit. This year its top contributor, the JEHT Foundation, shut down because it had lost all of its money in Bernard Madoff's Ponzi scheme. The \$500,000 JEHT - which stands for Justice, Equality, Human Dignity, and Tolerance - had provided annually funded one-fourth of Equal Justice Initiative's budget.

Stevenson talked about the problems created because Alabama is the only state with capital punishment that does not guarantee post-conviction legal representation for condemned killers.

Some 10 percent of the state's 203 Death Row inmates have no lawyer, while half were represented by lawyers whose out-of-court expenses were capped at \$1,000, he said.

Stevenson noted that the state's appellate bench is all-white. But a disproportionately low percentage of judges and lawyers are black and a disproportionately high percentage of prisoners are black.

Those issues contribute to the perception among blacks that the system is unfair, despite gains from the civil rights movement.

"Until we address them, that perception will undermine our ability to get to a fair and just place," he said.