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Equal Justice Initiative leader wins \$250,000 prize for efforts

By Alvin Benn

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BIRMINGHAM -- Attorney Bryan Stevenson's Montgomery-based Equal Justice Initiative got a much-needed \$250,000 boost Thursday -- no thanks to disgraced financier Bernard Madoff.

It happened at Samford University where Stevenson, whose group helps death row inmates with their appeals as well as indigent defendants, split \$500,000 with two European human rights officials.

The Gruber Foundation Justice Prize was awarded to them during a ceremony at Samford's Cumberland School of Law as professors and law students watched and applauded.

The cash award couldn't have come at a better time, according to Stevenson, who said Equal Justice Initiative's major supporter "took a big hit" when Madoff's fraudulent investment operation came apart at the seams during the past year.

"We lost \$500,000 last year because our biggest funder, the JEHT foundation, had invested all their money with Bernie Madoff and lost all of it," he said. "Our loss represented about a quarter of our funding because of that, so this award will help us make up for some of that."

Stevenson said he appreciates the awards, money and recognition that he has received through the years, but is not doing what he does for personal gain.

"I'm not a rich person and the people I serve need it more than I do," said the 49-year-old Delaware native who received his law degree from Harvard University before heading south and setting up shop in Alabama.

In 1995, Stevenson was awarded a \$300,000 MacArthur "Genius Grant," and other financial awards also have been given to him, but he said he refuses to accept them for himself.

Several of his friends drove from Montgomery to Birmingham to be on hand for Stevenson's latest honor, and they led the cheering section for him. They were not surprised by his generosity.

"He's just phenomenal. There's no other way to describe him," said Assistant Commissioner of Agriculture Jerome Gray. "Many young lawyers with his abilities and talents would want to work for some major law firm making \$500,000 or more a year, but he's willing to make this kind of sacrifice for Alabama."

Honored along with Stevenson were Robert Kushen and Isabela Mihalache of the European Roma Rights Centre, a group that focuses on racism and human rights abuse in Europe.

The awards were given by Patricia Murphy Gruber, who spoke on behalf of her husband, Peter, who was too ill to attend the ceremony.

One of the proudest spectators in the front row of the law school's Moot Courtroom was 80-year-old Howard Stevenson, who said his son "has been doing great things since he was 12."

"He'd always be out somewhere giving speeches, but never wrote anything down," said Stevenson's father, who then raised his right hand to his head and added: "It all came from here. He was that good."

The *National Law Review* has listed Stevenson as one of the 100 most influential lawyers in America, based in part on his efforts leading to reversals and reduced sentences in more than 75 death penalty cases.

The biggest laugh of the event came at the end when Bernice Donald, a federal judge from Tennessee, looked at Bryan Stevenson, who was on a platform with the two other honorees, and then shifted her gaze to his father and said: "Thank you for this worldly treasure."
