

NYU Law professor advances human rights

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by Clarissa Wei

Bryan Stevenson's office looks like that of your average professor: There are stacks of books on shelves, papers lying everywhere and a neatly packaged sandwich sitting atop a stack of documents.

But here's one way this professor, who works at the NYU School of Law, is different from most: He works as the executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative of Alabama, a nonprofit organization that provides legal representation to impoverished defendants and prisoners who have been denied fair treatment in the legal system.

Recently, EJI, along with the European Roma Rights Centre, received the 2009 International Justice Prize, awarded by the Peter and Patricia Gruber Foundation, which honors those who have advanced the cause of justice in the legal system.

As part of this award, Stevenson received \$500,000 for his achievements in the legal sphere.

A graduate of Harvard Law School, Stevenson has long been working to defend the rights of racially discriminated and impoverished people in Alabama. He has won various awards for his work, including the MacArthur Foundation's "Genius Award" and the Thurgood Marshall Medal of Justice.

Stevenson's work at EJI is largely credited for the reduction and reversal of more than 75 death penalty cases.

"This country has not yet recovered from decades of racial bias institutionalized by slavery and segregation, and that legacy has still fractured our ability to be a just society," Stevenson said. "There is a lot of work to be done to address those problems."

EJI seeks to solve these problems by providing legal representation to impoverished people "who have been unfairly prosecuted, unlawfully convicted or been partially sentenced," Stevenson said.

Although Stevenson is now a prominent lawyer, it was not his lifelong dream.

"I was a philosophy major in college, and nobody told me until I was a senior that they don't pay philosophers when you graduate," he said.

So he enrolled in law school.

"I was interested in challenging issues like race and poverty, and so it seemed like a law degree might help that," he said.

Stevenson said his work on a death penalty case sparked his interest in human rights for misrepresented individuals facing the death penalty.

Stevenson plans to donate his \$500,000 award to EJI in order to advance race and poverty work, compile reports and provide services for blacks in the South.

"Bryan is so generous and absolutely cares about the work that we're doing," said Brandon Buskey, an NYU School of Law alum who works for EJI. "I think this proves his dedication to what we're doing here. The university has a lot of reason to be proud of the work that he's doing."