Michael Starks was a remarkable person. A childhood chess whiz whose prowess at the game attracted a stream of challengers to his family’s home (including even visiting sailors and seamen who had heard of his talents by word of mouth). A voracious reader who worked his way through the shelves of the local library. A gregarious and loquacious soul who, as his sister told me yesterday, could “talk to a tree.” And, of course, a pioneer.

Like many other pioneers who broke down barriers – he was motivated not by a desire to make history or gain notice, but by a simple desire to live his life well and move beyond. Like other students, then and now, he was drawn to law school by a love of learning and a desire to make a difference through the law. A local who grew up a short distance away from campus, he was drawn to Tulane Law School by the quality of the education available.

For a remarkable man who did remarkable service as a pioneer at this institution, Michael’s daily experience at Tulane was – I am happy to say – quite un-remarkable. His student days brought all the usual hardships and challenges of being a first-year law student – casebooks and outlines, I am told, squeezed out time for chess – but only the usual hardships and challenges.
Both as a student and looking back in future years, Michael loved Tulane and was a loyal alum who kept up with classmates and returned often for alumni gatherings. He was a Tulanian through and through.

After law school, Michael went on to break additional barriers: as the first African-American lawyer to work in New Orleans’ City Attorney’s office, during the administration of Mayor Moon Landrieu. There, as at Tulane, he quickly established a reputation as an outgoing, engaging, and extremely talented professional with a steel-trap mind.

I deeply regret that in my short time at Tulane I never had the opportunity to meet Michael. That is a personal loss. But, in a very real sense, I am touched by Michael every day as I walk these hallways, interact with our students, and meet our talented alumni.

Michael opened a door at Tulane Law School through which many have since walked and, in doing so, he has immeasurably enriched and helped to transform this great law school. Tulane Law School today has all the assets that drew Michael here as a student – a rigorous academic program, world-renowned faculty, a powerful reputation around the globe – but it also has so much more. As I walk the halls of our diverse and vibrant community today, it is
impossible to imagine Tulane Law without the breadth of experience, perspective, and culture that we today too often take for granted.

In the years since Michael’s graduation, Tulane Law School has graduated more than 700 African-American students and more than 1,600 students of color. What began with one remarkable man now makes up roughly a fifth of all Tulane Law graduates since Michael’s graduation.

Many of these graduates, like Michael, have gone on to extremely successful careers – as the leaders of large law firms, as judges, as academics and University trustees – and have transformed their own communities. I am pleased to acknowledge just one of those graduates who is with us today: Nannette Jolivette-Brown, J.D. Class of 1988 and LLM Class of 1998. Ms. Jolivette-Brown had the opportunity to meet Michael while she was a law student, when he came back to the law school to mentor students, and she recalls him as an inspiring figure who gave her confidence in her own promise as a lawyer. She considers herself to be twice the beneficiary of Michael’s pioneering actions: Not only did she follow in Michael’s footsteps here at Tulane Law, but also in the New Orleans City Attorney’s office, where she now serves as the City Attorney. What’s more, she has been recommended by
Senator Landrieu for consideration by the President as a nominee for the United States District Court in New Orleans. If nominated and confirmed, Ms. Jolivette-Brown – the former student who was helped and inspired by Michael Starks – would become the first African-American woman to serve as a federal judge in the State of Louisiana.

Michael Starks’ legacy has shaped and now helps to define Tulane Law School. It continues to reverberate in the lives of all who pass through this building and always will. We celebrate his remarkable life and are forever in his debt.