



# From Courthouse Crusader to

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# William Skell's Journey

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# Justice

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learned that injustice comes in many different forms. While most people are inured to human toll that results from the inequities that plague the federal system of justice, there are a handful of criminal justice superheroes who devote their lives to helping unravel decades of systemic issues that produce excessive sentences.



**Imagine a young Baylor Law School graduate, the first Black student to walk the halls of his institution, staring down a future in a system far from perfect. That's where Michael Heiskell's story begins, and it's a tale woven with threads of resilience, trailblazing, and relentless pursuit of justice.**

Heiskell didn't just enter the courtroom; he shattered glass ceilings, becoming the first African American president of the Tarrant County and Texas Criminal Defense Lawyers Associations, his voice a powerful echo for those seeking fair representation.

And his dedication didn't go unnoticed. Awards rained down – Lawyer of the Year, Presidential Awards, Hall of Fame inductions – each a testament to the impact Heiskell has made. Even his alma mater, Baylor Law School, recognized his achievements, bestowing upon him the prestigious Lawyer of the Year Award.

But Heiskell wasn't just about titles. He honed his skills on both sides of the aisle, giving him a unique understanding of the legal landscape. This "insider knowledge" became his weapon, wielded with laser focus against law enforcement and prosecutorial misconduct. He knew the system's flaws intimately, and he wasn't afraid to expose them.

### **Prosecutor to Defender: Witnessing Misconduct, Seeking Change**

As a young attorney in the mid-70s, Heiskell envisioned himself as a change agent, a voice for the voiceless within the charging process. He believed his presence as a Black lawyer could balance the scales, ensuring fairness for *all citizens*.

Heiskell's experience was mostly positive as he learned the system's complexities and honed his future defense skills. But like any profession, there were some bad apples. On more than one occasion, Heiskell witnessed colleagues mistreating defense counsel and accused individuals.

Witnessing the devastating impact of even one bad

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Addressing this reality.

conduct. Prosecutors relied solely on their  
shred moment came in 1976, when Heiskell  
s County District Attorney's Office. Chief  
Prosecutor John Sparring's memo on jury selection advocated blatant exclusion of minorities and women, sparking outrage in Heiskell. He confided in Larry Baraka, an African American

Now president of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, Heiskell has formed the Task Force on Prosecutorial Accountability, a powerful weapon against prosecutorial misconduct. This elite team isn't interested in courtroom theatrics; their mission is surgical, targeting unethical tactics that undermine justice. Think hidden evidence, shady informants, and roadblocks thrown in the face of innocence claims. These are just some of the "unfair tactics" the task force will dissect, exposing their impact and crafting solutions to neutralize them.



Heiskell also understands that true change begins with the individual: ***"In confronting the misconduct of prosecutors, we must also turn the mirror on ourselves to see if we are up to the task of mitigating it, making the necessary record to preserve it, while also seeking to guard our clients from the potential fallout from our zealous efforts."***

Heiskell's professional journey has been a testament to the power of one individual to change the course of justice. He stands tall as an inspiration, a beacon of hope, and a reminder that even the seemingly insurmountable can be overcome with unwavering determination.



Joshua Bevill

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