

## **Detroit Mercy celebrates civil rights alum**

**BY SOPHIE TORCELLO**

VN SPECIAL WRITER

As part of a Constitution Day celebration, Detroit Mercy history professor Dr. Roy E. Finkenbine highlighted the contributions of an unsung civil rights worker who sometimes worked with Martin Luther King Jr. and also is one of the university's alums.

The late Robert W. Saunders, who attended University of Detroit Law School in the 1950s, spent nearly 40 years fighting for civil rights in the South, Finkenbine said in a Sept. 14 lunchtime talk.

Born in 1921, Saunders was raised in Tallahassee, Florida, where he was exposed to the racial injustices of the Jim Crow era. He made it to Detroit decades later before heading back to Florida.

"When you left the South, it was almost like moving countries," said Dr. Finkenbine.

"Everything was segregated: education, public places, public transport, restrooms and drinking fountains. Even if you were white and disagreed with this, you still had to abide by it because it was state law."

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, also known as the NAACP, was important in giving African-Americans a voice for political justice.

Saunders gradually became involved with the NAACP as his education progressed.

In 1941, he attended Bethune Cookman College in Florida. The following year, he was drafted into World War II. He worked in aviation maintenance until he was discharged in 1946, said Finkenbine.

Following the war, Saunders decided that he wanted to move to Detroit to complete his education. He graduated from the Detroit Institute of Technology, which no longer exists, with a bachelor's degree in liberal arts.

In the summer of 1951, Saunders enrolled in U of D law school, completing just one year. The pressure of school and supporting his family led to his decision to dedicate more time to the NAACP.

"The NAACP was used after the war by African-American soldiers who became tired of the racist attitudes following their return," said Finkenbine.

"This increased the organization's support, presenting the opportunity to aggressively challenge Jim Crow laws," he said.

Saunders' role in the NAACP took a turn when the secretary of the organization, Harry Moore, was assassinated on Christmas night in 1951 by the Ku Klux Klan. Moore's death motivated Saunders to leave law school and accept a formal position with the NAACP.

From 1952 to 1965, Saunders served as field director for the NAACP in Florida and became a leading voice for African-Americans during the Civil Rights Movement.

He helped in the fight to overturn “separate but equal” laws, and contributed to many successful legal cases involving segregation in education, transportation and voting rights.

He worked alongside important figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and future U.S. Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall.

Saunders was offered and accepted the position of chief of civil rights for equal opportunity by the federal government in Atlanta, retiring in 1988.

Professor Kyle Langvardt of Detroit Mercy Law School was among those attending Dr. Finkenbine’s talk.

“Even though the laws of Jim Crow no longer exist, this does not mean that segregation has been eradicated from society. Separate is never equal,” he said.

Another member of Detroit Mercy's faculty voiced her disappointment at the small crowd attending the speech, emphasizing that the story of Saunder's contribution to the Civil Rights Movement is important to the university and needs to be heard.

Finkenbine's talk was part of a series.

For the next installment, Harvard University's Anna-Lisa Cox will be at Detroit Mercy on Oct. 19 to discuss her book "The Bone and Sinew in the Land," which addresses African- American settlement in the nineteenth century.