The Southern Center recognizes Harold G. Clarke – Justice (1979-90) and Chief Justice of the Georgia Supreme Court (1990-1994) – for a lifetime of contributions to justice and fairness in Georgia. His work on the Court, as well as his service in leadership roles with the State Bar of Georgia, including as President in 1977, was based on a firm belief that the responsibility of our legal institutions is equal to their power. Chief Justice Clarke was legendary for his leadership on professionalism; as he explained, “Ethics is a minimum standard which is required of all lawyers while professionalism is a high standard expected of all lawyers.” His commitment to improving efficiency and uprooting bias and inequality in the justice system led him to create, in 1990, the Joint Commission on Alternative Dispute Resolution; in 1992, the Chief Justice’s Equality Commission; and, in 1993, the Chief Justice’s Commission on Racial and Ethnic Bias. These important contributions were crowned by his pioneering advocacy for indigent defense reform in Georgia.

In his State of the Judiciary address in 1993, Chief Justice Clarke spoke bluntly and passionately about the woeful state of indigent defense in Georgia at that time: “We set our sights on the embarrassing target of mediocrity. I guess that means about halfway. And that raises a question. Are we willing to put up with halfway justice? To my way of thinking, one-half justice must mean one-half injustice, and one-half injustice is no justice at all.” Chief Justice Clarke’s sage words, acknowledging the deeply troubling reality faced by poor people accused of crimes and the concomitant constitutional crisis in Georgia’s courtrooms, preceded conversations in the legislature and in the press by nearly a decade. His courageous determination to highlight and address an unpopular issue paved the way for the passage of Georgia’s Indigent Defense Act in 2003. While our work to ensure that Gideon’s promise is fulfilled is far from complete, we are grateful for all that Chief Justice Clark accomplished, and attempted to accomplish, on behalf of Georgia’s most vulnerable citizens.

Gideon’s Promise, formerly the Southern Public Defender Training Center, is reforming the public defender system “one lawyer at a time.” Begun as a training program in the South, and using innovative education and mentorship programs as well as partnerships with critical institutions like the Southern Center for Human Rights, Gideon’s Promise has grown into a movement that is spreading to courtrooms throughout the nation. Lead by Ilham Askia & Jon Rapping, the Gideon’s Promise community is inspired, trained, and mobilized to work toward a nation where every person, including the most vulnerable, has the access to zealous and effective criminal representation necessary to ensure “equal justice for all.” Indigent defense is this generation’s civil rights movement and the men and women of Gideon’s Promise are on the front lines.