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DISTINGUISHED LAWYER HONORED

Written by CYNTHIA ROBY
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Eugene K. Pettis, a co-founder and managing partner of Haliczzer, Pettis & Schwamm PA, never wanted a career in law. In spite of being urged by his mother to become an attorney, he chanced other careers, none of which he said were satisfying.

"As far back as I could remember, my mom always said, 'You talk so much you need to be a lawyer.' Although I remembered that phrase, I wanted to be everything else," he said. Influenced by the 1960s television show *Adam-12*, Pettis first dreamed of becoming a police officer, a choice that, he said, "My parents were not excited about."

He added, "I later studied science with plans of becoming a dentist; I hated that. I was miserable. Approved for an interdisciplinary study, I planned to study environmental engineering and law. After the first day, I knew that was not for me. So I redirected my studies and went to law school. Mom was right."

As an attorney, Pettis has earned numerous legal awards and accolades. He has been named to the list of Florida Super Lawyers from 2006 to 2009 as selected by *Law & Politics* magazine; the *South Florida Legal Guide* "Top Lawyers" list in South Florida for 2008 and 2009, and *Florida Trend's* peer-voted "Legal Elite" 2008 and 2009 lists.

"It's about respect," Pettis, the youngest of seven children, said of his achievements. "Those publications are driven by fellow peers nominating and voting for you. Lawyers know who the best lawyers in town are; it was driven by those with whom I litigate with and against."

James Haliczzer, Pettis' law partner, agreed, describing Pettis as "a wonderful partner, a great guy and great friend."

He said the two met 25 years ago while working in the same law firm.

"We left there and opened another practice. Later, we left there and started Haliczzer Pettis & Schwamm," said Haliczzer, who is also a managing partner at the firm.

"There has never been a question in my mind about his integrity, ability or anything else," he said of Pettis. "And there certainly has never been an issue we haven't been able to resolve before the last sip of the first beer."

Pettis, 48, is admitted to practice in all District Courts in Florida, including Southern District, Middle District and Northern District.

He also earned Martindale-Hubbell's top AV rating for his high professional and ethical standards. The system is based on the confidential opinions of members of the Florida Bar and the Judiciary, including both those who are rated and those who are not.

A Fort Lauderdale native, Pettis began practicing in Broward County in 1985 after graduating from the University of Florida in Gainesville. His practice, which services clients in areas including South Florida, Naples, Ocala, Orlando and Tampa, has always been based in Fort Lauderdale.

"My family base is here," he said of his reasons for returning to Broward County after graduating from the University of Florida's Levin College of Law.

"I felt Broward County was a growing area; promising. I wanted to be a part of it. Although I could have experienced success in other areas, it makes a huge difference returning to your hometown; a community in which you are deeply rooted and have a positive family image."

He continued: "I stand on the shoulders of my parents and my siblings before me, and I build on that."

Pettis, for the last eight years, through the Pettis Family Endowed Scholarship, his family foundation, set up scholarships at Broward College to help students make the transition into higher education.

Preference is given to African-American students.

"It eliminates some of the financial burdens," he said. "Education is important."

Pettis served on BC's foundation for 15 years and chaired the board for three.

Dating back to his years at Stranahan High School, Pettis has been involved as a public servant.

While attending U-F, Pettis said he quickly realized that the black students, comprising a distinct minority on campus, were not involved.

"There were all sorts of reasons not to be, but I didn't think there was a reason to attend a university of that size, with all its richness and opportunity, and not to engage in activities," he said.



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Becoming president of the Black Student Union his freshman year, he said his focus was to encourage black students to get involved in all aspects of the university's student government.

"That started my service there. Later I became the first African-American student body treasurer," he said.

Pettis continues his involvement as a member of the U-F law school board of trustees.

"It's important to give back to the community and be a public servant," he said.

Pettis admitted that while he is happy with his career and all that he has achieved, "when it comes down to it, I want to be known as a good lawyer—and, more importantly—a good public servant."

CynthiaRoby@Bellsouth.net

Photo by Elgin Jones/SFT STAFF. Eugene K. Pettis

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