

Acceptance of the Utah State Bar Raymond S. Uno Award by Erik A. Christiansen

I would like to begin by thanking the people who nominated me for the Raymond S. Uno Award. I am deeply honored and grateful. Those who know me understand that I have always tried to be an ally, and recognition like this reminds me why that commitment matters.

I was born in 1963, at a time when the United States was going through enormous social change. During my childhood, a number of civil rights leaders were assassinated—ten in all during the 1960s and early 1970s. Their names and sacrifices left a deep impression on me: Medgar Evers in June 1963 in Mississippi; Malcolm X in February 1965 in New York City; James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, both murdered in Selma, Alabama during the voting rights struggle in March 1965; Jonathan Daniels, who was shot while protecting a Black teenager in Alabama later that same year; Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., assassinated in Memphis in April 1968; Bobby Hutton, killed by Oakland police in April 1968; Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, both killed by Chicago police in December 1969; and George Jackson, shot by guards at San Quentin in 1971.

Growing up, I watched the civil rights protests, the Vietnam War protests, and the Watergate scandal unfold on television. These events shaped my understanding of justice and accountability, and they influenced the path I would ultimately take in life.

Later, as a young lawyer practicing in Los Angeles, I lived through another defining moment in American history—the Rodney King trial. When police officers Stacey Koon and Laurence Powell were acquitted of beating Rodney King, the verdict sparked the Los Angeles riots. I witnessed the aftermath firsthand. During that time, I did pro bono work for a Korean grocer whose store had been burned to the ground and who had been denied a FEMA loan to rebuild. I appealed the decision and was able to secure the loan for him so he could reopen his business.

I also served as a staff attorney on the Webster Commission, which investigated the police response to the riots. The Commission's work examined how law enforcement handled the unrest and documented the ways in which the response had been mismanaged.

More recently, in May 2020, like so many Americans, I watched the killing of George Floyd on television. It was another moment that reminded me that the struggle for justice and equality is ongoing. I realized I couldn't simply sit on the sidelines—I had to continue doing what I could to help move things forward.

One effort I am particularly proud of was helping start the Utah chapter of the American Bar Association's Judicial Intern Opportunity Program (JIOP). The program was originally launched by Judge Barbara M.G. Lynn and others with the goal of providing opportunities for law students who might otherwise lack access to the judiciary. Over the past 24 years, JIOP has placed more than 3,600 law students with state and federal judges in paid summer internships. The program

is open to everyone, but it focuses on providing opportunities to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The goal of JIOP is straightforward: to help eliminate bias in the legal profession by opening doors and expanding opportunity. It's a goal I believe in deeply.

I worked hard to establish the Utah chapter of JIOP. I secured approval from the ABA's Litigation Council and helped raise private funding to support the program. For four years, numerous law students in Utah were able to obtain paid internships with state and federal judges through this initiative.

Unfortunately, that effort came to an abrupt halt in 2025. The General Counsel of the Utah State Court Administrator's Office issued a non-public opinion stating that the program was not compatible with Utah's anti-DEI laws, even though the program itself is open to students of all races. The opinion was never shared with me, and the reasoning remains unclear.

Shortly thereafter, the Utah District Court stopped allowing federal judges, magistrates, and bankruptcy judges to participate in the program as well. Once again, no one was willing to explain the decision publicly. As a result, Utah became the only state among the 24 states with JIOP programs where the initiative could not continue because it was labeled a DEI program.

I was deeply disappointed by these developments. Still, I remain hopeful that opportunities like JIOP will return in the future.

Just last week, another giant of the civil rights movement passed away—Reverend Jesse Jackson. While driving back from California, I listened to his entire funeral service. Reverend Jackson founded the Rainbow Coalition, an alliance of diverse racial, ethnic, and economic groups united against oppression, poverty, and injustice. His message was simple but powerful: we are stronger when we stand together.

President Obama once said in a eulogy that moments like these remind us that we have been here before. The work of civil rights is unfinished, but history shows us that progress is possible.

Reverend Jackson often urged people to "keep hope alive." He also reminded us that civil rights are the unfinished business of America.

Tonight, I dedicate this award to Reverend Jackson and to the example he set for all of us. His life reminds us that the struggle for justice requires allies, perseverance, and faith in the possibility of change.

I encourage everyone to continue being allies and to stand together in the fight against injustice, bigotry, oppression, poverty, and racism.

Thank you again for this honor.