Growing up in Miami’s Overtown neighborhood, H.T. Smith learned to fight at an early age. As the smallest in his class, fighting was a matter of survival. But the little boy who withstood the “withering cold of Jim Crow” to become one of Miami’s most distinguished lawyers and civic leaders soon learned words are far more powerful than fists.

For 42 years, Harold Teliaferro Smith Jr.—Vietnam veteran, trailblazing trial lawyer, civil rights champion, legal scholar, and University of Miami alumnus and trustee—has employed his oratorical skills to fight discrimination and pursue justice for people around the corner and around the world. Long ago branded an “agitator” by a bigger, better-financed opponent, he wears that mantle proudly.

As chair of the Coalition for a Free South Africa in the 1980s, Smith lead such a fight? His answer mirrored his creed: “Those who believe in freedom, justice, and equality believe in fighting discrimination wherever it rears its ugly head.”

As a boy, Smith endured the indignities of legal discrimination. He still remembers the snarl of the bus driver who threatened his grandmother when she failed to move to the back quickly enough. He can still picture his mother squatting on the roadside because “coloreds” weren’t allowed in white rest stops. He never met a black lawyer, much less dreamed of being one.

His calling came later, as a U.S. Army lieutenant in Vietnam, where he headed after earning his B.S. in mathematics from Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University in 1968. There, in the jungles of Vietnam, black soldiers who didn’t trust white officers to represent them for infractions, turned to Smith. At the time, he didn’t know much about law, but he was hardworking, passionate, tenacious, and won his first cases.

Returning to Miami, Smith hoped to attend UM’s School of Law but was told he was too late to take the admissions test. His reply:

“While I was in Vietnam fighting for your freedoms, you were giving the admissions test to draft dodgers.” The first in his family to set foot on a college campus, he became the fourth African-American to graduate from Miami Law.

Smith began his career as Miami-Dade’s first African-American assistant public defender, then its first African-American assistant county attorney. In 1981 he founded H.T. Smith, P.A., specializing in personal injury, civil rights, and criminal law, and earning numerous accolades.

Recognized by the National Law Journal as one of the top trial lawyers in America, he is listed in Florida Super Lawyers, The Best Lawyers in America, and Law and Leading American Attorneys.

The founding president of the Black Lawyers Association of Miami-Dade County, (now the Wilkie D. Ferguson, Jr. Bar Association), he served four terms as the organization’s president and, in 1995, as president of the 20,000-member National Bar Association. That same year, Smith and two others raised $4 million to build the NFL Youth Education Town (YET) Center in Liberty City. Today, YET provides homework assistance, computer training, arts and crafts, and sporting activities for 500 kids daily.

In 2003 Florida International University’s School of Law tapped Smith to lead its Trial Advocacy Program, which has won regional and national mock trial competitions under his leadership. The school’s Black Law Students Association has renamed itself in his honor.

Elected to the UM Board of Trustees in 2004, Smith is also a member of the University of Miami Hospital Board of Governors, and chair of the Gwen Cherry Park Foundation in Liberty City. He has served on numerous other professional, civic, and community boards, and received numerous honors, including the Daily Business Review’s 2015 Lifetime Achievement Award.

Reflecting on his own life, the father of three daughters has said he was born “at the perfect time to be black in America—able to feel the withering cold of Jim Crow and to see the sunlight of Barack Obama in the presidency.”

The University is proud to welcome H.T. Smith, a man who has helped the sunlight of equality and possibility shine ever brighter, as today’s commencement speaker.