A noteworthy omission

To the Editor:

As an inactive emeritus member living and working in Florida, I applaud your May issue, Blacks in the Law II. I want to point out one significant omission. The black lawyer who deserved prominent mention in that issue was my friend, the late Kenneth Cockrel.

The African-American History Project at Wayne State University described the senior Cockrel this way:

Cockrel became a partner in the law firm of Philo, Maki, Cockrel, Rubb, Spearman, and Cooper and immediately launched a legal career that would change the social and political landscape of Detroit. Through a series of highly publicized cases, Cockrel highlighted the oppressive social structure under which Detroit African Americans lived. In his first such case, Cockrel defended Alfred Hibbitt, who was accused of shooting two police officers in a 1969 shootout at the New Bethel Baptist Church. Cockrel won an acquittal for Hibbitt by citing the racist activities of the Detroit Police Department.

Cockrel burst into the consciousness of all Detroit during the trial when he was charged with contempt for calling the presiding Recorders Court judge a "lawless, racist, rogue bandit, thief, pirate, honky dog fool." He successfully defended himself against the contempt charge, partly by exposing that the Wayne County Jury Commission systematically insured that juries were overwhelmingly white, male, and middle class.

In 1970 Cockrel successfully defended James Johnson who shot and killed a coworker at a Chrysler auto plant. Cockrel won an acquittal by demonstrating the oppressive working conditions at the plant, which he argued pushed the defendant to a mental breakdown that resulted in the shooting.

Cockrel also became the leader of the citizens group that led the protests against the Detroit Police Department's STRESS (Stop the Robberies—Enjoy Safe Streets)

> ## Kenneth Cockrel was a great lawyer, rare leader, and a wonderful humane person who left us way too soon.

unit, which had a long record of police brutality in the African-American community....Coleman Young disbanded the STRESS unit when he became mayor in 1974. Cockrel was elected to the Detroit City Council in 1977 where he continued his fight for social justice.

Gabe Kaimowitz
Gainesville, Florida

Response from Edward Littlejohn, Blacks in the Law II author

I agree with Mr. Kaimowitz regarding Ken Cockrel's status. Ken and I co-taught Police Misconduct Litigation courses at Wayne State University Law School. He was a great lawyer, rare leader, and a wonderful humane person who left us way too soon. He, however, was not overlooked when the May 2015 cover was created. It is a collage of black lawyer "firsts" and, unfortunately, we couldn't identify a category for Ken. If the *Bar Journal* ever has a cover with Michigan's great lawyers, I would suggest that Ken be at the top.

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