Paving the Way for W. Howard Fort: The University’s First African American Trustee

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I was in junior high school when Dad came home and shared the happy news that occurred during a busy day at the office. His stories were always filled with personal anecdotes about his clients or fellow attorneys or the focus of a lunch meeting he attended at Iacomini’s. One evening in 1967, I could sense something major had occurred. At the top of his list of highlights was the phone call he received that day from The University of Akron President Dr. Norman Auburn.

We had heard this kind of excitement in his voice before, so we knew the news was important. It usually meant
the arrival of an opportunity that he had prepared for his entire life, which may have seemed less likely to come his way in this climate of social change—until it did. The civil rights movement was transforming America’s cultural landscape, and with it, the campus culture. The reason for Dr. Auburn’s call was to ask my dad if he would accept an appointment as a Trustee on the University’s Board of Directors. He would be the first African-American invited to serve, in the very same year the institution became a state university. Dad was thrilled to accept.

It was one of many proud and happy moments in my father’s life, and one that I had the good fortune to share with him. He and my mother were both deeply engaged with the Akron community, and from time to time, they would take me along to one event or another. I was introduced to The University of Akron Board members and their wives when I was still a young teenager. More than once I joined them for a formal dinner of filet mignon, followed by ice cream for dessert, in the Jean Hower Taber Student Union. After dinner, we all boarded a chartered bus for a trip to the Rubber Bowl and the Acme Zip Game, where we were seated in the press box. These evenings gave me an appreciation for my dad’s commitment to the University and the respect that was afforded to him and my mom.

Norman Auburn’s name was spoken almost daily in our home, and my parents were often guests in his. He was one of the red threads that was woven into my parents’ very active
social lives in the 1960s and ’70s. He was a colleague and friend. They trusted one another at a time when uncomfortable issues occurring on campus and in other parts of the city made collaboration more difficult. My dad’s calm, intelligent, and reasoned approach, coupled with Dr. Auburn’s wisdom and openness, certainly were appreciated by both men and paved the way for the work they would tackle together.

Among my fondest memories is an evening when I was a senior in high school. Dad took his responsibilities as a Trustee seriously. If he could not be present for a Board event, which was rare, Dad made certain he was represented. The times I spent with my parents taught me how to be comfortable in a business environment and in the company of adults. When a scheduling conflict arose, Dad asked whether I would like to attend The University of Akron Board dinner and the Acme Zip Game—without them. The Board was gracious and accommodating in welcoming me to the table.