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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 15, 2003

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NAACP LEGAL DEFENSE FUND HONORS CHAMPIONS OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

National Equal Justice Award Dinner Set for November 6, 6:30 P.M. Hilton New York & Towers

(October 15, 2003) The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) will present defenders of the University of Michigan's affirmative action admissions policies with its **2003 National Equal Justice Award**. University President **Mary Sue Coleman**, former president **Lee C. Bollinger**, former law school dean **Jeffrey S. Lehman** and key corporate supporter **General Motors** will be honored at a gala dinner on November 6, 6:30 P.M. at the Hilton New York & Towers. Emmy award-winning actress **Alfre Woodard** will be Mistress of Ceremonies.

In June, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the University of Michigan Law School's affirmative action policy. LDF filed a friend of the court brief in the case and represented African-American and Latino student intervenors in a companion case, *Gratz v. Bollinger*, that challenged the undergraduate school's admissions policy. In *Gratz*, the high court reaffirmed that race may be considered as a factor in admissions decisions.

In announcing the honorees, LDF President and Director-Counsel Elaine R. Jones called the Michigan cases a part of the continuing quest to realize the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education*. That 1954 Supreme Court decision overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine of legally sanctioned discrimination. LDF founder Thurgood Marshall led the legal team that secured the landmark ruling.

"The Legal Defense Fund is pleased to recognize Mary Sue Coleman, Lee Bollinger, Jeffrey Lehman, and General Motors for their steadfast support of a diverse student body and the principle of educational equity enshrined in *Brown*," Jones noted. "They held open the door of opportunity that LDF pried open 50 years ago, ensuring black and brown students continued access to the nation's institutions of higher education."

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. is not part of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). LDF was founded by the NAACP in 1940 and shares its commitment to equal rights. Since 1957, LDF has had a separate board, program, staff, office and budget.

Mary Sue Coleman assumed the University of Michigan presidency in 2002 and lent her unwavering support to defending the university's admissions policies. Coleman lauded the Supreme Court ruling for giving educators "a green light to pursue racial and ethnic diversity." She also vowed: "First, our commitment to a diverse campus will continue. And second, every student admitted to our University will continue to be eminently well qualified."

With 53,000 students on three campuses, the University of Michigan is one of the nation's most competitive public universities and one of the world's premier research institutions. Coleman's predecessor at the University was Lee C. Bollinger. Now president of Columbia University, Bollinger was named U-M president in November 1996. He steered the institution through five years of challenges to its admissions policies. The lawsuits were initiated in October and December 1997 by white applicants who were denied admission to the undergraduate school and law school, respectively.

Writing in the *Washington Post* the day after the Supreme Court decision, Bollinger stated, "The court's decision is a great victory for American higher education, and for the nation as a whole. [It] suggests that the court knows what the nation knows: that, unfortunately, race still matters in the United States..."

Jeffrey S. Lehman was named dean of the University of Michigan Law School in 1994. He began his term as president of Cornell University in July. During his tenure as U-M law school dean, Lehman helped shape the legal argument for universities' freedom to consider race as a limited factor in the admissions process, in order to achieve meaningful levels of racial integration.

When the Supreme Court upheld the law school's admissions policy, Lehman noted, "The question is no longer whether affirmative action is legal; it is how to hasten the day when affirmative action is no longer needed."

The General Motors Corporation played a decisive role in forging a strong voice by Fortune 500 corporations supporting the University of Michigan's use of affirmative action in student admissions. A major player in the global economy, GM filed briefs at every stage of litigation – in District Court, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, and the Supreme Court. GM's arguments underscored the value of a "well educated, diverse work force," and pointed out the role of diversity in "teaching students the human relations and analytic skills they need to succeed in the work environments of the twenty-first century."

LDF is the nation's preeminent public interest legal organization. It was founded in 1940 under the leadership of Thurgood Marshall, the renowned civil rights attorney and first African-American U.S. Supreme Court Justice. Although LDF works primarily through the courts, its strategies include advocacy, educational outreach, monitoring of activity in the executive and legislative branches, coalition building and policy research.

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For more information about LDF's National Equal Justice Award Dinner, electronic photographs of this year's emcee and honorees, or to be added to the press list for the event, please contact Nathea Lee at (202) 833-9771 or nathealee@mckpr.com.