On August 18, 2015, Louis Stokes died at the age of 90, just two months after a diagnosis of brain and lung cancer. He was the grandson of a slave and son of a father who died when he was three years old. His mother worked as a maid and did her best to provide for Louis and his brother Carl as they struggled to make ends meet while living in a public housing project in central Cleveland. Despite his humble beginnings, Louis Stokes became Ohio’s first African-American congressman, who over the course of 30 years in the House, became one of its most powerful members, and used that power to focus federal attention on the nation’s poor. He also made his mark as an attorney, participating in three cases before the United State Supreme Court, including the landmark Terry v. Ohio case. Meanwhile, his brother Carl became the mayor of Cleveland — making him the first African-American to be elected as the mayor of a major United States city.

I am privileged to have known Louis Stokes. We first met when I was a Shaker Heights teacher and he was a distinguished member of Congress. Regardless of his busy schedule, he would frequently visit my classroom to speak with my students.

Fast forward to 2008 when we met again: I, now a partner with Tucker Ellis and President-Elect of the Federal Bar Association Northern District of Ohio Chapter, and Louis Stokes, retired from Congress and an attorney with what was then Squire Sanders. I had nominated him for the chapter’s newly created “Pillar of Justice Award,” and had the pleasure of both informing him he had won and later presenting it to him. Although he had received hundreds of awards during his celebrated career, he was truly touched by this particular award because it honored him for his contributions as an attorney, which were often overlooked due to his long and distinguished political career.

In 2009 — now as chair of the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association 3Rs Committee — I interviewed Louis Stokes as part of a video on the Equal Protection Clause and the Civil Rights Movement for use in the Cleveland and East Cleveland Municipal Schools. He had just returned from President Obama’s inauguration. My first question to him was whether he had thought he would see the day an African-American was sworn in as our President. He paused, and for a moment I thought he was going to lose his composure — something Louis Stokes seldom did. He shared that he had never thought it would happen in his lifetime, and how extremely proud he was of our nation in light of the long, hard Civil Rights struggles that paved the way for it.

As I planned for my term as Cleveland Metropolitan Bar President — set to begin in June 2012 — I was aware that while the CMBA had a number of good pipeline diversity programs, there were no opportunities for college students. I set out to remedy that by creating a program consisting of paid summer legal internships and mentoring at law firms, courts, and legal non-profits for Cleveland and East Cleveland Municipal School District graduates interested in careers as attorneys — the vast majority of whom are minorities who come from poverty-level households. I had no doubt who it should be named after: Louis Stokes — not only an attorney and “Civil Rights Icon,” but also a graduate of the Cleveland public schools.

We launched the Louis Stokes Scholars Program at my inauguration, where Louis Stokes spoke about how proud he was to have his name associated with it. He told the audience that when he graduated from law school, no such programs existed, and that he and other African-American attorneys were barred from consideration for any jobs with Cleveland’s prestigious law firms.

When he met with the first class of Louis Stokes Scholars, he urged them to take advantage of this wonderful new opportunity. Afterward, he sent me a handwritten note which said:

Words are truly inadequate for me to express my personal appreciation for the tributes you have given me, both in the Federal Bar Association and now the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar. I am truly honored to have my name associated with the Bar’s Internship/Mentorship program … I treasure our friendship. Sincerely, Lou.

Louis Stokes kept in touch with me and the Louis Stokes Scholars Program thereafter, and he participated in the Stokes Scholars graduations held at the end of the summer internships. He was particularly impressed with a graduation presentation in 2012 by two Stokes Scholars who spoke about the Terry v. Ohio case that Louis Stokes had handled, using actual recordings from oral argument and simulating a “Terry Search.” One of those Stokes Scholars is now a 2L in law school and the other will be attending upon graduating from college.

This summer, the CMBA held its fourth Louis Stokes Scholars Program graduation. Unfortunately, because of his health issues, Louis Stokes was unable to attend. However, his grandson Brett Hammond — an Assistant Cuyahoga County Prosecuting Attorney — attended in his grandfather’s absence and as a mentor to a graduating Louis Stokes Scholar who interned with the Cuyahoga County Prosecutor’s Office. It is certainly gratifying to know that another generation of Stokes family members is actively involved in the program.

A great measure of our lives is the impact we have had on those that remain after our passing. By that measure — and any other — Louis Stokes’ legacy will live on as an inspiration to others. I am grateful to have known him, to have honored him during his life, and to have played a role in keeping his memory and legacy alive through the Louis Stokes Scholars Program.

Carter Strang is a partner with Tucker Ellis LLP and past CMBA president. He is Co-chair of the CMBA 3Rs Curriculum Committee and drafted new 3Rs lessons for 2015–16. He is actively involved with the CMBA Green Initiative and Louis Stokes Scholars Program, both of which he started. He has been a CMBA member since 1984. He can be reached at (216) 696-3956 or carter.strang@tuckerellis.com.