H e is a man of many firsts. And the list is long. His awards and achievements bolster the School of Law’s decision to honor George L. Russell Jr. ’54 as the 2000 Distinguished Graduate of the Year.

He was the first African American to sit on the Circuit Court in Maryland. He was the first African American to sit on an appellate court in Maryland. He was the first African American to be president of the Bar Association of Baltimore City. These are only three firsts, but three of which he is particularly proud. In fact, he is honored by Baltimore magazine as one of 200 most memorable citizens of the last millennium.

How do these feats compare to receiving the Distinguished Graduate Award? “To be recognized by your peers is the highest honor one can achieve,” Russell exclaims. And to know the history behind the statement makes his words ring poignant. When he graduated from the University of Maryland School of Law, Russell was not allowed to take the bar exam review course because he was African American, despite being allowed to sit for the bar. “I left the podium with my degree in hand and headed straight for the Army,” explains Russell. “Only two blacks (out of 50) were slotted to pass the bar exam and I knew one peer already passed.” Russell was the second and knew of his passing prior to being stationed in Heidelberg, Germany for two years. “To come from that point to this point [being designated as a distinguished graduate] is quite significant,” says Russell.

Russell first practiced law with associates Brown, Allen, Watts & Murphy and theirs was the first black law firm to move downtown. In 1966 he was appointed associate judge, Circuit Court for Baltimore City and in 1968 was the City Solicitor of Baltimore. He returned to private practice in 1974 and then formed Russell & Thompson with Kenneth L. Thompson ’76 in 1977; the practice merged with Piper & Marbury in 1986.

With the dawning of the millennium, Russell anticipates his new role working alongside a friend he’s known for more than 30 years, Peter Angelos. “This is an unbelievable opportunity. I am very excited,” says Russell. Since Jan. 3, Russell has been with the Law Offices of Peter Angelos, PA and states, “I’m healthy, and if I can add value, I’m not going to retire and dry up. I’ll wait until I dry up to retire.”

Unlikely. Longevity and perseverance are in his blood. One of eight children, he worked his way through law school, and because of his diligence, he remains a faithful alum. Says Russell, “I want to demonstrate to those who come behind me that they can be successful with hard work, and it is their obligation to serve the community. In me, I want them to see a sermon rather than hear one.”

The pursuit of excellence is a recurring theme for Russell. It is a driving force, a motivating factor, a constant in his life. It is this determination that has placed him in the Hall of Fame, National Bar Association and honors him with the Award for Invaluable Pro Bono Legal Services to the NAACP (one of 10 lawyers in the nation to receive it). His search for excellence has been recognized by businesses who want him on their boards of directors—Russell is a member of the Audit Committee and Executive Committee, Constellation Energy Group Inc. and chairman, Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, Baltimore Branch.

But perhaps his most treasured accomplishment is the appointment as Fellow, American College of Trial Lawyers. Again, for his colleagues to recognize him is among his highest honors. “But [the Distinguished Graduate Award] represents a broader standard; therefore, it is more important,” states Russell.
Sincere. Humble. Genuine. Trustworthy. The roots run deep where these adjectives apply. Stephen J. Nolan ‘76, this year’s recipient of The Benjamin L. Cardin Pro Bono Service Award, comes from a lineage of hardworking immigrants who made their livings and raised their families in Baltimore.

“My father grew up in poverty but was not impoverished as far as having compassion for others,” Nolan states. His grandparents on his maternal and paternal sides emigrated from Italy and Ireland respectively and set good examples in the area of community service. The tie is strong.

Nolan attended Loyola High School in Baltimore and spearheaded two community service projects that launched his public-service career: one at Rosewood State Hospital, a facility for retarded adults; the other at the Maryland School for the Blind. In college, at Villanova University in Pennsylvania, he volunteered at two prisons performing bail reviews. It was “[this] interaction with the prisoners that first prompted my interest in law school,” Nolan explains.

For all of his 22 years as an attorney, he has focused his energy on his general practice firm, Nolan, Plumhoff & Williams, Chartered, founded by his father, James D. Nolan. Within this 12-lawyer practice, Nolan concentrates on malignant asbestos disease claims, personal injury claims and complex business and environmental litigation in state and federal courts.

Nolan’s language, manner and intonation speak to his modesty. In conveying a recent court victory, he states, “I was fortunate to represent a young woman who developed an asbestos-caused malignancy, called mesothelioma. On Aug. 6, 1999, after a two-week jury trial, the Circuit Court for Montgomery County awarded her a substantial cash award.” Though the case is on appeal, Nolan affirms, “I am optimistic for the client.”

His resume boasts yet more service. He is a member of the executive committee of the Maryland State Bar Association Board of Governors and of the Maryland Judicial Commission on Pro Bono. He was elected by the Baltimore County Bar Association to a third term on the Trial Courts Judicial Nominating Commission for Baltimore County.

One particular service experience had special personal meaning to Nolan—his work in 1995-96 as first chair for the Maryland Coalition for Civil Justice. The coalition was convened by the Maryland State Bar Association to respond to the impact of the national funding crisis on Maryland legal services.

Today, Nolan is excited about the opportunity to sit on the board of the American Lung Association of Maryland, Inc. He works alongside a lung specialist from the University of Maryland Medical Center, among others, in reassessing the association’s mission in the local health care community.

Among his personal accomplishments, Nolan is quick to recognize his two daughters, Kate (17) and Laura (15). He is a proud father, boasting that his daughters are good friends, good students and good athletes. His wife of 21 years, Sue, is an event coordinator for the Maryland Chapter of the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.

His colleagues hold Nolan in equal esteem as he holds his daughters and wife. He is the recipient of the Award for Professional Legal Excellence for the Advancement of Rights of the Disadvantaged by the Fellows of the Maryland Bar Foundation. He received the Arthur W. Machen Jr. Award from the Maryland Legal Services Corp. and an AV Rating from Martindale Hubbell Bar Register of Preeminent Lawyers.

As for the School of Law bestowing The Benjamin L. Cardin Pro Bono Service Award on him, Nolan explains, “This is a special honor, as Congressman Cardin drafted me in 1990 as the first president of [what was then] the People’s Pro Bono Action Center, known today as the Pro Bono Resource Center of Maryland. The award is greatly treasured. It will encourage me to stay active in pro bono work.”