

# Peddle



# David B. Mitchell '63

Now a judge, he returns with mixed feelings about being black in an all-white school

**DAVID B. MITCHELL** is an associate justice for Baltimore City 8th Circuit Court. He is a leading judge in the field of juvenile justice and has gained national attention for his legal and social work. In February Mitchell appeared on two national television programs: an A & E Network production, "American Justice" and an interview with NBC Nightly News. He graduated from Peddie in 1963, received a B.A. from Fisk University in 1967 and a J.D. from Columbia University Law School in 1970.

He is chairman of the board of the Associated Marine Institutes Inc. of Tampa, Florida, a non-profit organization operating 40 rehabilitation programs for youthful offenders in eight states. He also devotes time to boards of trustees of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and the National Crime Prevention Council.

For 27 years he has been married to his wife, Diane, an administrator in the Baltimore City Schools. He is the father of three children: Robin, a graduate of Temple University, who is completing a Master's in Urban and Community Planning at Morgan State University, and 22-year-old twins. Thea attends Temple University and David is at St. Mary's College.

By Susan James  
Public Relations Director

**J**udge David Mitchell '63 returned to Peddie's campus on Founders Day for the first significant time in 30 years to share his vision of justice and civic responsibility to the most diverse student body in the school's history. One of the most respected juvenile judges in the nation, Mitchell embraces his old school with a candid ambivalence: Peddie gave him educational opportunity and warm friendships, but it also harbored some of his life's most haunting and painful memories.

In January, 1957, Mitchell arrived at Peddie as a second-term sixth grader. As a day student from nearby rural Bordentown, he was one of only two other African-Americans on a fundamentally Baptist, all-male, virtually all-white campus. His father worked for a state facility for mentally retarded as a vocational arts teacher, and his mother was a private duty registered nurse.

"At that time, the public school system in Bordentown was notoriously poor in its ability to educate students, and my parents were convinced it was particularly poor for the education of black children," remembers Mitchell. "There was a residue of racism in the public schools and the rumors were that they had not graduated a black student for several decades."

Consequently, the Mitchells enrolled young David at Peddie where he attended first as a day student, and then in his last two years as a boarding student. A



younger sister went off to a boarding school in South Carolina, and the oldest boy attended Trenton High School.

"It was an incredible sacrifice on my parents' part and an incredible investment in The Peddie School," said Mitchell, whose parents were able to afford a private school education through a combination of generous scholarships and financial aid. His parents borrowed money each year to augment the aid, and he also contributed by working from the time he was in 8th grade. The work program at Peddie provided for scholarship students to work off some of the tuition.

"At the time all the waiters were scholarship students, both academic and athletic," explained Mitchell. "And there were a good number of them. I waited on tables and also did some kind of work for Dean Millard DuBois, although I don't remember what."

Mitchell adapted quickly to life at Peddie where he had "wonderful educational opportunities. I enjoyed the academics and was tremendously engaged socially. I remember many warm relationships and there was

great interplay between students and faculty."

But the face of the school, as was that of most private boarding schools in those days, was not a multi-cultural one, and Mitchell was part of a small minority of black students, "never more than three or four." He remembers an upper classman, whose father was a Newark dentist, and fellow classmate Melvin Evans, whose father was lieutenant governor of The Virgin Islands.

"The all maleness of the school was never an issue," said Mitchell. "I adapted to that. It didn't make a difference. Girls were not part of our existence. You did receive, however, a warped view of life. But being black with 400 white students, there were incidents and they were very difficult for me.

"There were racial incidents, the residue of the troubles of this country. Some of them I never discussed with anyone. These incidents occurred but were not predominant in the school's life. Sometimes it was faculty, sometimes students. But this is the way America was in fifties and sixties."

Each year at the close of the school year the lower school gave an entertainment program that coincided with graduation activities and to which parents were invited. The theme for Mitchell's seventh-grade class was Stephen Foster and songs selected for the performance were 'Old Black Joe' and 'I'm A Comin.'

"The songs written for this were not something I wanted to do, but I was part of the class," remembers Mitchell. "The professor had us rehearse and I remember I was the one who had to play Old Black Joe—in front of my parents. It was very humiliating. You wouldn't make a Jew sing German war songs,

but no one considered it would be humiliating to me as a black. I think it was just an ignorance of my feelings by the student body."

Despite this, Mitchell does remember the warmth of many parents and students. As a class officer for two years and a member of athletic teams, he had some "very strong relationships."

*"Why in America do we still judge people by the color or shape of their skin, and not by the content of their mind or character? Why must children still go hungry in the land of plenty? Why are children born in innocence raised to utter words of hate and bigotry?"*

—Judge Mitchell's Founders Day address

"I've had no contact with anyone at Peddie for years. The only times I did come back, I could count on one hand. When we lived in New York City my wife wanted to know where I went to school. We were on campus for about five minutes."

A black consciousness was emerging in Mitchell by his senior year and he realized that he needed to attend a school which reflected his own background. He chose Fisk University, one of the premier historically black universities in Nashville, Tennessee and the school his mother had attended.

"But more importantly, I realized by my senior year that I was black," said Mitchell. "That I was going to be black for the rest of my life and that I was very proud to be black. I needed to be more involved with black people. I needed to know more of my history and more about my life as a black person. I wanted and needed the emotional and social support of Fisk.

"I was also tired of people smiling at me. There would no longer be a lot of people smiling at me, never knowing how they really felt. People looked at me and their

true feelings came through their eyes. In my first experience at Fisk some white man tried to run me over in his car. I knew I'd made the right choice."

The civil rights movements of the 1960s drew Mitchell, who was not "super active" but participated in several demonstrations around the country.

"This is something I am very proud of," he added. Choosing a career in law was "a natural outgrowth of the direction I was headed. I liked history and government activities and had also become a debater. I had won the freshmen debating championship. I kind of gradually moved into law

from the civil rights movement. I wanted to be an advocate for those who were not in a position to do things for themselves."

Mitchell graduated from Columbia University Law School in 1970, an experience he said was "fortified" by his experience at an all-black university. Now married, he and his wife chose to leave New York City to seek a better place to raise their children. Although he wanted to return to New Jersey, he was offered a position with an African-American law firm in Baltimore.

In 1984, following several years of private practice in corporate and civil litigation, he came on the bench in general jurisdiction, the highest level court in the city, hearing cases in criminal, domestic and juvenile crime. When a vacancy occurred on the juvenile bench, he took it and devoted the last decade to the critical issues of youth at risk.

"There is a significant portion of children today who are literally throw-away kids. There are no resources and no attention paid to their needs," explained Mitchell. "We fail to realize that these kids