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NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS LAWYER MORRIS DEES TO SPEAK AT UD’S DISTINGUISHED SPEAKER SERIES

DAYTON, Ohio — Morris Dees' civil rights efforts have placed him at odds with the country’s most notorious racists.

He has received death threats, and his offices have been burned. But he’s not giving up his fight.

Dees will speak about “A Passion For Justice” at 8 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 15, in the Kennedy Union Ballroom at the University of Dayton. Admission to his speech is free and open to the public.

According to an article in Modern Maturity, Dees said he first got interested in law in 1956 when he was a student at the University of Alabama. He watched as Arthurine Lucy, a black student, tried to enter the all-white campus on the first day of school and was harassed by Ku Klux Klansmen. He said he spoke against the incident at the Baptist church where he was the Sunday school superintendent and was fired the next week.

Dees received his law degree from the University of Alabama in 1960 but did not practice law until 1968 when he sold his cookbook publishing company and entered civil rights law. His first victory was in 1969 when he sued to integrate the YMCA in Montgomery, Ala.

In 1971 he co-founded a law firm with Joseph J. Levin Jr. which eventually became the Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit group of lawyers who specialize in lawsuits that involve civil rights violations and racially motivated crimes. Dees won a precedent-setting $7 million-dollar judgment when he sued the Ku Klux Klan in 1981 for lynching a man in Mobile, Ala., and he later won a $12.5 million verdict for the family of an Ethiopian murdered by skinheads in Oregon in 1990.

In addition to addressing crimes by racial and militia groups, the law center has worked to change the jury selection process to make juries more reflective of the general population. Because blacks and poor whites receive the death penalty more often than wealthy defendants,

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death penalty cases are another focus for the center.

The center has also created “Teaching Tolerance,” a collaborative project with teachers across the country to educate students about interracial respect.

In 1996 Dees published Gathering Storm: America’s Militia Threat. He’s also written Hate on Trial: the Case Against America’s Most Dangerous Neo-Nazi and an autobiography titled A Season for Justice. A made-for-TV movie about his life, Line of Fire, aired on NBC in 1991. Dees was portrayed by Wayne Rogers in Ghosts of Mississippi, a 1996 movie about the life of slain civil rights worker Medgar Evers.

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For more information, call Kathy Duell at (937) 229-4114. For media interviews, call Judy Bruno at the Southern Poverty Law Center at (334) 264-0286.