

A close-up portrait of Dr. Alfred L. Edwards, an older African American man with a receding hairline, wearing a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, and a patterned tie. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a gentle expression.

**DR. ALFRED L. EDWARDS**  
**1920–2007**

# An Integrated Life

**W**hen Alfred L. Edwards, professor emeritus of business administration, died January 26 in his sleep at age 86, the Ross School and the University of Michigan lost one of its greatest teachers. Edwards was a driving force in recruiting and mentoring minority students at the business school for more than 30 years. He was instrumental in leading the Ross School's effort to join the Consortium for Graduate Study in Management, the alliance among business schools that works to bring African American, Hispanic American and Native American managerial talent into MBA programs. Last year, he was honored by the Black Business Students Association (BBSA), which named its annual conference after him, and by the Black Business Alumni Association, which awarded its first scholarship in his name in 2006.

Dr. Edwards lived a consummately integrated life. He modeled integrity of character by being a man whose actions were in harmony with his words. As a catalyst for integrating the business school, he exhorted African American students to participate fully in the life of the community. And he was integral to the growth of the business school, reaching out to colleagues and students, making himself indispensable through both formal and informal channels.

Edwards liked to quip that he “integrated the faculty” when he was hired as a professor of business economics in 1974. During a recent interview, he described how his colleagues welcomed his arrival at a time when there were very few African

American professors at American business schools. “I got a rousing standing applause at the faculty dinner. I was very pleased with that,” he recalled fondly. “They actually acted as if they were glad to see me.” Now, more than 32 years after he joined the business school faculty, the world is full of alumni, colleagues and others who are considerably more than glad to have known the man they came to know affectionately as Dr. E.

“One of the personal highlights of my time here,” said Ross School Dean Robert J. Dolan, “was getting to know Dr. E and having the chance to understand the legacy he created here and in the business world generally through his students. Though we are all obviously saddened by his death, I am happy that I can count myself among the many ‘students’ who owe him a great deal of gratitude for the life lessons he taught.”

## From Key West to Washington

Alfred L. Edwards was born on August 9, 1920 as the only son of Eddie and Kathleen Edwards in Key West, Florida. After his parents divorced, he was raised by his grandparents at around the same time that Ernest Hemingway was living and writing on Key West. After he graduated from high school, Edwards worked in an aspirin factory in New York before enlisting in the Army, from which he was honorably discharged toward the end of WWII. Four years after he graduated from high school,

and with the help of two friends who helped him find a job and lent him clothes, Edwards enrolled at Livingstone College, a historically Black college in Salisbury, North Carolina. “I’m forever indebted to those two guys for helping me along, introducing me to the college and letting me find my way through.” It was at Livingstone that Edwards met Willie Mae Lewis in 1944, whom he married in 1949. At Livingstone, too, Edwards received the kind of encouragement from mentors that he would one day provide to so many. The dean of the theology school brought him to conferences and appointed him to leadership positions. (“I was one of the few students, he said, who understood his sermons.”) An English professor encouraged him to start the campus newspaper, of which he became editor-in-chief. In 1948, Edwards graduated magna cum laude. With characteristic modesty, he attributed the attention and support he received from his professors to his status as “a slightly older student who got along well with the faculty.”

After earning his MA in economics from the University of Michigan in 1949, Edwards obtained his first academic appointment at Southern University, a historically Black college in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He later joined the faculty of Michigan State University as an assistant professor of economics and, in 1958, earned his PhD in economics from the University of Iowa. As a member of the Michigan State faculty, Edwards was assigned to a team of professors and administrators assembled to establish the University of Nigeria,



“we thought it was a great thing. The University thought it was a great thing. And we were proud to have that accomplishment. It engendered competition from all over the country.” Edwards often identified three important benefits of attracting a diverse student body. First, the school achieved prominence in the rankings by assuming leadership in an important area. Second, Ross became more attractive to companies that valued diversity but did not previously recruit at Michigan (with the result that the entire student body enjoyed better employment opportunities). Third, peer schools began to emulate our activities and open their doors for more minority students.

Each year at the annual orientation program for the Consortium, he welcomed students by exhorting them to make the most of their experiences at Ross by becoming active members of the community and leaders of various student organizations. He spoke proudly of former students such as **Ralph Johnson**, MBA '92, currently director of professional development and administration at McKinsey & Company, and **Al Leandre**, MBA '02, currently president and CEO of Vyalex Management Solutions, who became presidents of the Student Government Association. “These were no slouches,” he insisted. “These were really good students who took the lead in doing things for the school.” He was especially pleased to know that “they had a great interest in making sure that their peers succeeded in the classroom.” Edwards took great pride in those students who initiated tutoring sessions, group study sessions and other imaginative approaches to help their classmates succeed, viewing their active involvement as “the highlight of my work here.”

During his tenure at Ross, Dr. Edwards served as director of the LEAD Program in Business, a member of the Board of Trustees for the Consortium for Graduate Study in Management and faculty adviser of the Black Business Students Association (BBSA). In addition, he served on the Western Michigan University Board of Trustees for 16 years, including four years as chairman; sat on the board of directors for Security Bank Corporation; and participated actively in the National Economic Association (NEA), including stints as president and secretary-treasurer. The NEA gives an Alfred Edwards Award for distinguished service to the organization.

Nsukka. He joked that he was omitted from the team originally selected for the assignment until “my good liberal friends told them that they could not send a team to Africa without sending at least one African American. And since I was the only one on staff, that meant me.”

In Nigeria, Edwards focused primarily on designing a curriculum that would provide the needed foundations in the social and applied sciences. He placed special emphasis on agriculture economics, management and engineering. After he completed the assignment, he returned to East Lansing where he received a phone call from the White House inviting him to come to Washington and consider a position in government.

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy appointed Edwards to the position of deputy assistant secretary of agriculture. In this capacity, he developed policies to enhance rural economic development. He held this position for 10 years, served under Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon, and in 1969 received the Distinguished Service Award for the department. In 1974, with a warm recommendation from Professor Paul McCracken, who had been chairman of the President’s Council of Economic Advisers in the Nixon administration, Edwards returned to Michigan to join the faculty of the business school.

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## A Michigan Man

Edwards joined the business school as director of research and as a professor of economics, teaching a course on the development of minority enterprise that had previously been taught by Professor David Brophy. However, he soon found other ways to contribute. “Whenever a minority student had trouble of some kind, like academic trouble, they always called me and I would call the student and we would try to resolve it,” he recalled. “It was [the faculty’s] interest in the students that led them to talk to me, which I thought was a great thing.” When the admissions staff lamented their inability to attract minority students, Edwards agreed to attend the next recruitment event. He noted that “as a result of my presence at the table, a lot more African American students came by and I was placed on the admissions committee where I was able to influence the number of African American students brought to campus. When I began there were only six African American students, but by the time I conclude this, I guess there will be a hundred or so.”

Edwards attributed the success in attracting a diverse student body to two factors: the membership of the business school in the Consortium for Graduate Study in Management, which the business school joined in 1987, and the hiring of Judith Goodman as director of admissions. The Consortium provided access to a pool of qualified minority applicants, and the presence of Judith Goodman, as the school’s first African American admissions director, made a statement about the school’s commitment to diversity. As more and more minorities applied and were admitted to the business school, said Edwards,



Patrice Harduar and Dr. Edwards



Left to right, Isadore and Linda King and Al Edwards (front row), Ralph Johnson and Saquent Robinson (back row), at the Ross School of Business 2006 Annual Scholarship Dinner for donors and recipients.

## The Lounge

Not long after Edwards arrived at Michigan, students began to congregate in his office to discuss family, work and school in an environment they viewed as safe and supportive. "His office would be packed," said Professor Gautam Kaul, the John C. and Sally S. Morley Professor of Finance. "It was funny because he would have people sitting there even when he was not in his office. It was like the lounge for people. That level of comfort has to show his uniqueness." Edwards himself recalled that "one of my faculty colleagues asked to be moved because there was so much laughter and talk coming from my office." Thomas C. Kinnear, the Eugene Applebaum Professor of Entrepreneurial Studies & Professor of Marketing and director of the Samuel Zell & Robert H. Lurie Institute for Entrepreneurial Studies, enjoyed his proximity to the "lounge." "I had the pleasure of having an office for a long time down the hall from him," said Kinnear. "I thought it was a rock concert half the time." In fact, many students had the sense that Dr. E knew more about their social lives than

did many of their classmates. There are legends about couples (including my wife Lynn and me) who met in Dr. E's office and eventually married.


In her recent tribute published in the *Monroe Street Journal*, **Patrice Harduar**, MBA/MPP '07, described how her relationship with Dr. Edwards developed after she began to have doubts about her goals. She recalled that, "I found myself surrounded by incoming MBA students interested in pursuing more traditional career paths. I wanted an MBA to work with nonprofit organizations that addressed community development and poverty issues in urban environments.... I told him that I was not yet sure how it was all going to work out and that I was feeling that my goals might not be realistic. Perhaps I should be thinking about a career in consulting or finance instead? But Dr. Edwards' words calmed my fears and concerns. He simply told me that what I wanted to do was wonderful. He said that there are so many opportunities for me to make a difference and have an impact," she recalled. That was the first of many interactions with Dr. Edwards. "Initially, I stopped by to talk about potential opportunities that would fit within my career goals. Dr. Edwards was very open about providing ideas and connecting me with individuals who might have additional career advice for me. However, as time went on, I found myself stopping by his office just to say 'hi,' to take a break from the hectic MBA life and perhaps to hear an interesting life story or two."

Edwards dismissed the notion that he was responsible for solving so many problems. "The truth of the matter is that they solved their own problems. I simply listened," he insisted. "They talked it through and found a solution and I'd say 'that's right!' They just needed someone to talk to who understood and would listen and give them some advice from time to time."

Dr. Edwards was as proud of his students as they were grateful for his gentle, constant advice. He loved to celebrate the achievements of PhD students who had gone on to become deans at other

institutions and of MBA students who had achieved success and prominence in corporate finance or consulting. And he always gave a shout to those who went into the nonprofit sector. "We have a significant number of our MBA graduates who have a mission to do something good for the world and they work in nonprofits at a lower salary, but they're doing a great job."

**B**efore he died, Edwards had opportunities to see how much he has meant to the Ross School community. In 1994, he saw the establishment of the Alfred L. Edwards Collegiate Professorship. In March 2006, the BBSA renamed its annual conference in his honor. The Black Business Alumni Association recently raised \$100,000 to endow the Alfred L. Edwards Scholarship. And, true to form, Dr. Edwards expressed his gratitude for the honor and attention, but showed reluctance to accept credit for his contributions to the school. "Whatever it is that I did," he asserted, "I did because I felt I was paying back. I remember how vividly my high school teacher showed me the way. My college professors and my graduate school professors all helped me along. So to talk to students for over 30 years was small pay for the great honor they led me to."

At the 2006 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day lecture, Dean Dolan overheard a conversation between MLK speaker Michael Eric Dyson and Edwards: "Michael asked Dr. Edwards what he did at the business school," recalled Dolan. "And his response was, 'I taught economics.' The last thing I'm going to say is that he just taught economics." 

**David Wooten**



In 2006, the Black Business Students Association named its annual conference after Dr. Edwards.