

This low-paid Atlanta lawyer is one of the best

Stephen Bright, tireless civil rights advocate, leaving Southern Center

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By [Bill Rankin](#) - Richard Halicks



The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Stephen Bright argues the Foster case before the U.S. Supreme Court in November 2015. (Art Lien / courtartist.com)

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For decades, Stephen Bright has worked to provide the quality of legal representation to the powerless and impoverished that only the wealthiest clients could afford. All the while, he has done so on a shoestring, forsaking the riches his profession could bring.

Bright settled in Atlanta in 1982, when he took over what's now known as the Southern Center for Human Rights. He routinely worked past midnight preparing court motions to stave off executions and juggling finances to keep the office afloat. He skipped so many meals his worried mother started sending him protein shakes.

“Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s message as I took it was that there was nothing more important than ending racism, poverty, materialism and militarism and nothing less important than how much money you made doing it,” Bright, 68, said of self-imposed low pay. “That suited me perfectly.”

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[Stephen Bright. \(Courtesy of the Southern Center for Human Rights\) photo](#)

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Stephen Bright. (Courtesy of the Southern Center for Human Rights)

Now, after 35 years, Bright is leaving the Southern Center, which he transformed into a force for justice on behalf of [inmates facing the death penalty](#), detainees in [unsafe jail conditions](#) and defendants neglected by [dysfunctional indigent defense systems](#).

But he isn’t easing back on the throttle just yet. He will continue to teach at some of the nation’s top law schools. And on Monday, Bright will argue his fourth case before the U.S. Supreme Court, this time on behalf of Alabama death-row inmate James McWilliams.

At issue is whether McWilliams should have been provided an independent expert who could have testified at trial about the defendant’s mental health. The case took on more significance Wednesday when two executions in Arkansas were stayed pending the outcome of the McWilliams decision.

Bright is one of only a few lawyers who can say they’ve won all their arguments before the nation’s highest court. In his three prior cases, [justices overturned death sentences because of racial discrimination in the jury selection process](#).

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[Stephen Bright outside the U.S. Supreme Court after arguing a case in November 2015. \(Bill](#)

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