

# [***How This Holy Cross Leader Helped Clarence Thomas And Ted Wells***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:67BM-D871-JBCM-F3PP-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** Amid polarizing ***politics*** and diminished trust, some powerful lessons from the man who helped Clarence Thomas

**Body**

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Father John Brooks about whom Justice Clarence Thomas once said, I know that I am the better for you having lived.

College of the Holy Cross

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**Here s an excerpt from this week s CxO newsletter. To get it to your inbox, .**

Martin Luther King Jr. Day is a time when I often reflect on what more I can be doing to support Black colleagues and create a culture that embraces diversity. AsFor(bes) the Cultureembarks on another trip to Tulsa (check out Jabari Young s conversation with Build in Tulsa s Ashli Sims), there s plenty going on.

The discourse around making a difference can feel complicated. SNLput the term "woke" to rest for meas a term I d ever use but it doesn't explain why being alert to racial discrimination has become such a biting insult. Ultimately, it s about creating the conditions for each of us to feel comfortable and able to succeed by being ourselves.

With all the polarization that's strangling ***politics***, it's no wonder we're seeking sanity at work. Check out the latest Edelman Trust Barometer, which found respondents naming business as the . Even some NGOs arefacing criticism for wielding too much power behind the scenes. That puts more pressure on leaders to be a force for good, whether in fighting climate change or addressing the stigma of cancer as a new cross-industry initiative launched today at Davos aims to do.

The word "ally" is another term that's both meaningful and loaded especially when people use it to describe themselves. But I want to celebrate a man who was a role model in allyshipbefore that term came into use. Rev. John E. Brooks S.J. was an ally to both Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and legendary litigator Theodore V. "Ted" Wells, Jr., two men who have long been on opposite sides of the affirmative action debate. (The Supreme Court iswidely expected to overturn or roll back affirmative actionin college admissions by June.) While Thomas and Wells may not agree on many issues these days, they both share a deep respect and love for Father Brooks, the longest-serving president of the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass.

The last time I saw Brooks, he had a stack of summer reading books beside his desk and was interviewing students for a spot in his fall theology seminar. He was 88 at the time, his body wracked with cancer, but he wasn t going to let that stop him from enthusiastically planning for the future. It was June of 2012, a few weeks before he died. I d published a book six months earlierabout an accomplished group of Black men whom the then theology professor had recruited to the mostly white all-male Jesuit college after the 1968 assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Among the 20 students that Father Brooks recruited that year: Wells, Pulitzer Prize winner Edward P. Jones, former investment banker and New York Deputy Mayor Stan Grayson, and Eddie Jenkins Jr., who played for the undefeated 1972 Miami Dolphins before building a career in law and public service. Another student he pushed to admit that year: an angry young man who d dropped out of the seminary named Clarence Thomas.

**"It's Not About What I Want Or Need"**

While the Holy Cross recruits succeeded through talent and hard work, the person who enabled them to thrive, through actions big and small, was Father Brooks. He defended them, mentored them, gave them accommodations to help form a community, and went lengths to bring them back when they quit en masse after racial profiling at a campus demonstration.

Brooks reasoning was less paternalistic than practical: Everybody had the potential to be a leader, in his view, which meant Holy Cross was missing out if it didn t create an inclusive environment for everyone. You'd never train the best if you only picked from a narrow pool. One of his first acts as president was to open the college to women in fall 1972. During his 24-year stint as president, and beyond, he mentored a vast range of men and women who often stayed in contact through the end of his life. Here's what he did to be an ally to the Black men who came to Holy Cross in 1968.

**- He understood that the experience of Black students was different** - Father Brooks said he would never understand the experience of being Black at Holy Cross, any more than he would understand the experience for women. But he did respect that it created challenges that had to be addressed. So he let the men get a designated "Black" corridor and involved them in matters of campus life. When they talked about wanting to get off campus to meet other Black students, Brooks lent them a car and later paid for a cheap station wagon they'd take turns using on weekends.

**- He listened and learned** - Brooks kept his door open to any student who wanted to talk, but he made a concerted outreach to Black students. When a few of the men complained about offensive lyrics to a popular school song, Brooks looked at the song in a new way and pushed to change it. He regularly stopped by the corridor to say hello and was available as a leader who cared. He didn t stereotype, Thomas told me. He saw people who were individuals who happened to be Black who had very different outlooks.

**- He challenged the culture -** He stood up to alumni who talked about declining standards, , and challenged his boss when the president refused to budge on demands that prompted every Black student to quit and walk out. He stood firmly with the students and pushed the institution to change. As he d once told Worcester s**Evening Gazette**, it was hard to shift the perception of white colleagues who couldn t see their own bias, never mind overcome it.

**- He created opportunities** - Along with inviting students to share their views, Brooks understood the importance of also bringing in more Black faculty on staff and engaging with the surrounding community. When Wells, now a partner at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, wanted to drop off the football team to focus on academics, Brooks assured him that his scholarship would remain intact. He admitted Jones as a promising young writer even though Jones says his SAT scores were ho-hum. (Let's not debate affirmative action withoutputting legacy admissionsunder the microscope, too) Brooks made it clear, Wells said, that at the very highest levels of the administration, people cared about their success. (Wells last year reflected onthe state of racial justice on the anniversary of George Floyd s murder.)

**- He accepted discomfort** - Brooks didn t like the idea of the students segregating themselves into a special corridor, nor did he agree with other views, but he respected the need to change. He'd been one of the rebels a few years earlier in Rome amid Vatican II when the Catholic Church underwent a seismic shift to modernize and become more inclusive. Change, for Brooks, was a constant and leadership meant being in a permanent state of evolution.

"It's not about what I want or need," he said. It's what's needed today to make a better tomorrow.

**- He showed up** Brooks made a specific point of visibly supporting the Black students. When I talked to the white students who were there at that time and later, they, too, had many stories about how Brooks provided support, humor and guidance in their lives. He was a combination of friend, uncle, priest, father, saint and good Samaritan, said Thomas. He's a great man. He did right by us.

When Thomas came back to the school to accept an honorary degree in June 2012, the Supreme Court Justice teared up during a discussion that I moderated with him and the ailing priest.

You saw each of us as a person, not a project, he said to Father Brooks. I know that I am the better for you having lived.

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