

EDITH HOUSE LECTURER

Get comfortable being uncomfortable

The 37th Edith House Lecture was presented by Audrey Boone Tillman (J.D.'89), who currently serves as executive vice president and general counsel of Aflac and focused on her experiences of rising through the ranks as a woman of color.

“Every single experience that’s happened to me is a part of my success where I stand today,” Tillman said, noting that the overarching theme of her talk was “get comfortable with being uncomfortable.”

Tillman grew up in the Cascade Heights neighborhood in southwest Atlanta, which she described as an “exclusively African American experience.” When it came time to attend college, her father encouraged her to find a school that was outside of her comfort zone, and she chose the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Once there, she became close friends with her two roommates – who each had completely different upbringings – and eventually began considering law school.

Tillman was accepted at the UGA School of Law and was offered the Founder’s Scholarship. She described her time at the law school as “an absolute fundamental part of [her] maturation as a person and as a lawyer and as a woman, so [she is] forever grateful.”

Once in Athens, the self-described “reserved” person befriended student groups like the Davenport–Benham Black Law Students Association and fellow Chapel Hill graduates who helped her find her place at the law school.

After graduating, she served as a judicial law clerk for Judge Richard C. Erwin of the U.S. District Court for North Carolina and then took a position in private practice where she was the firm’s first African American employee.

She said her previous experiences helped her navigate the job.

“You just have to get through,” she said.

“You just can’t stay in the uncomfortable or the painful. You just have to keep moving and overcoming.”

Tillman eventually left that firm and served as an associate professor at the North Carolina Central University School of Law before she and her husband moved to Columbus, Georgia, where she took a position as a staff attorney at Aflac in 1996.

Since then, she has held several posts, from focusing on employment law to serving as the senior vice president of human resources to her current role.

In closing, Tillman noted that her entire career has been a series of experiences that she strives to get all she can from, and encouraged the lecture attendees to embrace their own failures and successes.

“I know that there will be times – you probably have already experienced some but if you haven’t, keep living and you will – there’ll be times that you will be so uncomfortable, despondent, dejected, depressed. Anything on that list, you’ll be that and that’s okay because that is what makes you stronger and better for the next thing,” she said.

The Edith House Lecture is sponsored by the Women Law Students Association in honor of one of the first female graduates of the School of Law. House, a native of Winder, Georgia, was co–valedictorian of the law class of 1925, the first to graduate women.

