

A Civil Tenor for Civil Rights

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HE is sometimes called the Thurgood Marshall of Long Island.

Like the man who successfully argued the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case and later joined the Supreme Court, Frederick K. Brewington is a soft-spoken lawyer and a seemingly tireless champion of civil rights.

Working out of an unassuming office in downtown Hempstead, Mr. Brewington argued for 12 years that the Town of Hempstead's system of electing town board members at large discriminated against blacks, finally winning a ruling in 2000 that forced the town to hold district elections. Today, the lion's share of his work -- his office has six lawyers and handles about 200 cases a year -- involves alleged civil rights violations, police misconduct or employment discrimination.

Perhaps less flatteringly, Mr. Brewington also is sometimes called the Johnnie Cochran of Long Island. Like the defense lawyer best known for his work in the O.J. Simpson murder trial, Mr. Brewington has a habit of landing in the media spotlight.

In 2000 he latched onto the racially motivated beatings of two day laborers living in Farmingville, a case that brought international attention to Suffolk County, but last year he was unsuccessful in his argument that the Schem Quality of Life Organization, an anti-immigration group, was partly responsible for the beatings because it had inflamed local hostilities. More recently, Mr. Brewington called a news conference to charge that the heavy police response to a disturbance at a baby shower in Roslyn Heights last month was excessive and racist. Mr. Brewington said that about 70 police officers descended on the community "like it was some type of ghetto," and he demanded that criminal charges against five men at the shower be dismissed. That case is still pending.

"He represents a side of our community that ordinarily wouldn't have representation," said Roger Corbin, a Democratic county legislator from Westbury. Mr. Corbin said he had heard Mr. Brewington compared to Mr. Cochran. "I know what people mean by that -- the popularity and the public entertainment of law," he said. "But Fred is not like that. He's not in it for the publicity. He's in it for the love of the law and the community."

Mr. Brewington said that he never met Marshall, and that he has had only a brief meeting with Mr. Cochran. But one black lawyer to whom he is not likened is a man with whom Mr. Brewington has had a close professional association and a continuing friendship: C. Vernon Mason, the civil rights firebrand who achieved notoriety when he represented Tawana Brawley, an upstate teenager whose accusation that she had been raped by white racist tormentors turned out to have been a hoax. Mr. Brewington worked in Mr. Mason's law office and was Mr. Mason's campaign manager when he ran unsuccessfully for Manhattan district attorney. Mr. Brewington also served as one of Miss Brawley's lawyers for a brief time in 1987 before hanging out his own shingle in Manhattan. But he and Mr. Mason remained close over the years, even after Mr. Brewington moved his practice to Hempstead in 1997.

Mr. Brewington said he learned a great deal from Mr. Mason, whose shoddy legal work and provocative style ultimately led to disbarment and an \$185,000 judgment against him in a defamation suit filed by one of the men falsely accused in the Brawley rape trial.

"Vernon taught me so much about law and he is probably the best trial lawyer I have ever seen," Mr. Brewington said. He called Mr. Mason's style "persistent" rather than confrontational and said he learned from Mr. Mason that to be good at cross examination, "you have to be like a good puncher; you have to find different angles."

But Mr. Brewington's personal and courtroom style is completely distinct from Mr. Mason's. He is not afraid to challenge his opponents, but there is a courtliness about him. "My approach is geared toward the environment I'm in," Mr. Brewington said, noting that the demographics and the culture of Nassau County are vastly different than those of Manhattan or the Bronx, where he practiced primarily when he worked for Mr. Mason. "I have no problem being in the street," he added. "But I make sure I'm always on solid ground legally before dealing with the social issues. That puts our adversaries in a position where they have to deal with us strategically."

Mr. Mason described his protégé as "very meticulous and scholarly," and said that while Mr. Brewington "picked up a lot of rudimentary stuff when he worked for me, he has his own unique and persuasive style and he just has a commanding presence in a courtroom."

Even Mr. Brewington's legal adversaries speak highly of him.

"We will go at it tooth and nail in the courtroom, but we can always shake hands at the end of a trial," said Paul F. Millus, a Manhattan lawyer who has faced off against Mr. Brewington in two high-profile cases. In the first, Mr. Brewington won \$93,000 for the family of Christopher Jackson, an inmate who suffered from sickle cell anemia and died in 1998 while in the Nassau County Jail. In the second, Mr. Brewington won \$2.25 million for the family of Christopher Wade, a black Elmont man who was killed in 1995 by a white Nassau County police officer who fired 16 shots at him in what a jury deemed "deadly excessive force." That case is now on appeal.

"Fred is a tireless worker on behalf of his clients," Mr. Millus said, noting that he frequently would find Mr. Brewington still at work in his office at midnight or on weekends when they were on trial. "And I mean this in the best way, he is a true believer in the positions he takes, whether I

believe them or not."

Mr. Brewington is 46 and lives in Freeport with his wife, Adrienne, who is pastor of the Westbury United Methodist Church. He grew up in Lakeview, a predominantly black community where he developed a strong sense of self and pride in his African-American heritage. He played football at Malverne High School and went on to become captain of the football team at the State University at Albany. While earning a law degree at Northeastern University in Boston, he interned at the Center for Constitutional Rights in Manhattan, then worked at several legal assistance centers in New York City before joining Mr. Mason's firm.

Ms. Brewington grew up with her future husband in Lakeview and said that after 16 years of marriage, she has grown accustomed to the long hours he puts into his work. "In the early days of our marriage I used to wish I was married to a more ordinary guy," she said. "But he practices law the way I pastor my church. He sees it as a calling, so it would be inappropriate for me to interfere with that."

Mr. Brewington still finds time for volunteer work in the community. For 18 years he has been a volunteer assistant football coach at Malverne High School and he is active in the Lakeview Youth Federation, which sponsors the annual Friendship Games, an annual track and field event for Nassau County high school students.

Ronald James, the head football coach at Malverne, said that every summer, when the team heads upstate for a week of training camp, Mr. Brewington rents a truck and hauls the equipment there and routinely forks over the camp fee for whoever on the team can't afford it. "He loves football, but he's also there to talk to the guys about life things," Mr. James said.

Mr. Brewington also teaches litigation at Touro College in Huntington, and is a frequent speaker at N.A.A.C.P. events and at local high schools, with topics ranging from race relations and what it's like to be a lawyer to tips on "how to interact with the police and live to tell about it." He also sings tenor in the Shepherd's Singers, a gospel group he formed with friends, and is a lay preacher in the United Methodist Church.

Dorothy L. Goosby, a town councilwoman in Hempstead and a plaintiff in the Hempstead voting rights case, said the spiritual side of Mr. Brewington helped her through the long 12 years she waited for victory in court. "I got discouraged somewhat when it dragged on," she said. "But we would pray before every hearing, quietly together, and that gave me strength."

Mr. Brewington decided to pursue the voting rights case after he ran unsuccessfully for the town board in 1987. "I had studied the Voting Rights Act, but I never thought about its application up north until then," he said. "I saw there clearly was a racial voting block pattern that did not allow African-Americans to elect their own candidate."

At the time, Curtis Fisher, an African-American, was on the board, but Mr. Brewington noted that Mr. Fisher originally was appointed to the board by the Republican Party.

Mr. Brewington maintains that the Hempstead case "was the lawsuit that changed the face of government in Nassau County." It led to two other similar lawsuits, for which Mr. Brewington acted as a consultant. One eventually stopped the Board of Elections' practice of purging its voter's rolls for non participation, a practice that eliminated blacks at a rate three times higher than whites. The other case led to the dissolution of the county's Board of Supervisors and to the creation of the County Legislature.

He also ran unsuccessfully for the County Legislature in 1995. He said he has not considered running for public office since, but he remains active in the Democratic and Working Families parties. He has filed a lawsuit charging that the redistricting of the State Senate discriminates against minorities.

Having worked in the New York City and Nassau County court systems, he is bold in his criticism of his home turf. "Lawyers are afraid of Nassau County juries, Nassau County judges and the Nassau County district attorney's office," he said.

He said because the judiciary in Nassau is "politically charged," minorities are often at a disadvantage. But he reserved his harshest criticism for the Nassau district attorney's office, which he said was too tightly controlled by the police department. "I think their track record is abysmal," he said, adding that they often seem intent on gaining convictions rather than giving promising young black men a chance to redeem themselves. "They have a narrow way of seeing the future through the view of now and they don't foresee the chance to break the cycle," he said.

Rick Hinshaw, a spokesman for District Attorney Denis Dillon, disagreed. "This office has a 99 percent conviction rate, so we're clearly not bringing cases that shouldn't be brought," he said.

Nassau County juries also tend to be stacked against minorities because the jury pool is almost always 90 percent white, Mr. Brewington said. Because Long Island is one of the most segregated suburbs in the country, he said, "there is very little cross-cultural exchange and it makes it easy for people to do the them-us thing."

Mr. Brewington brings a clear sense of mission to his legal work. "There's so much to be done in our community because discrimination is alive and well," he said. "I feel that we can do important legal work that has an impact on people's lives."