



The Three H's

Fred Brewington combats the costs of unequal voting access: hopelessness, hatefulness and helplessness BY AMY WHITE



When Frederick K. Brewington was growing up in Nassau County, there was an ocean between the Black and white communities—Ocean Avenue, the geographic and cultural divide that separated the two sides of the Malverne School District.

But oceans are meant to be crossed. And in 1966, Brewington and his elementary school peers did just that as the district officially desegregated. Opposition was intense; racial tensions reached a boiling point. "We were the test case for this region of the state," the Hempstead civil rights lawyer says. "I remember that morning, leaving for school, my mother said to me, 'Go straight to school. Don't walk on anybody's lawn because they don't want you over there anyway.'"

Brewington repeated his mother's warning to one of the journalists covering the tumult. "That was my first quote in the press," he says.

The experience marked Brewington's life. "Seeing those issues play out in the public square right in front of me made the need to advocate part of my being," he says. "I was raised to not allow people to suffer when you had the ability to have voice and input. My mother drilled that into me. Civil rights [work] was an appropriate, natural progression."

As an attorney, Brewington first made a name for himself with *Goosby v. the Town of Hempstead*, a voting rights case that came to him in 1987, a year after he was admitted to the bar, and lasted 12 years.

Dorothy Goosby, an African American Hempstead resident who wanted to serve on the town council, was part of the 1988 class action suit alleging that the at-large electoral system diminished the voting power of

African Americans, who made up 13% of the population.

"We had Hempstead, the largest township in the United States, which, in effect, had shut the door on its African American community in terms of representation and access," Brewington says. "Basically, the town would not allow African Americans to have voice and participation in town government."

He points out a vicious cycle that results from lack of access. "After hopelessness comes hatefulness. And after hatefulness comes helplessness," he says. "The three H's blend themselves into a cocktail that needs to be addressed, because once you allow people to fall into that sort of misery—not by their own doing—you've effectively demoralized them so that they don't participate. It's an insidious sociological reality."

With Hempstead's at-large voting, Brewington says, "There would be no way a candidate that was the choice of the African American community could be elected—they would always be outnumbered by the at-large voting system."

After years of appeals, and a kick-up to the U.S. Supreme Court—which denied cert—Brewington won a ruling in 2000 that forced district elections. In the newly created 1st District, Goosby, who'd been elected to a one-year term in 1999, won in a landslide. She's held office ever since.

"I've looked at the case in terms of the calculation of the human impact that we have as lawyers, and take a lesson from Thurgood Marshall and Charles Houston—that lawyers have the obligation to be social engineers, to address situations in our society and make them good for the whole," Brewington says. "Goosby was that."



Frederick K. Brewington

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CIVIL RIGHTS
HEMPSTEAD

On BLM

"'Black Lives Matter' is not a statement of competition with the value of other lives but an affirmative statement that recognizes what our history shows in devaluing Black lives in the USA. From slavery to lynchings, to water hoses and dogs, to George Floyd, the [lives] of Black people have been seen as not the same as white members of our community."

On Shelby County

"When the Court ruled 5-4 that Section 4(b) of the Voting Rights Act is unconstitutional, it further weakened the enforcement mechanisms that were intended to help address the levels of abuses that were occurring and still are occurring in jurisdictions across America. ... This decision creates barriers for Black and other racial minority persons to have full and fair access to the polls and to vote, and all the negative fallout that comes from that denial."