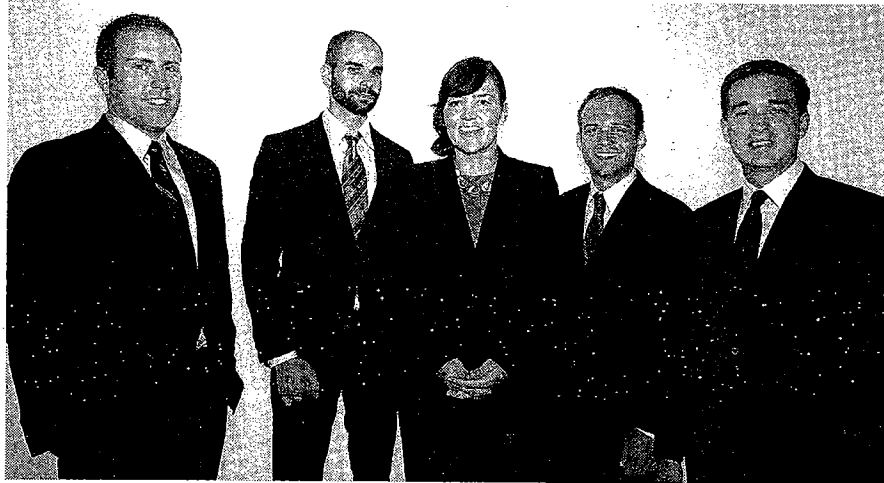


Jenner associates collect and record Leighton's memories



Marina Makropoulos

(From left to right) Jenner & Block LLP associates Brian H. Rowe, Thomas A. Bousnakis, Whitney B. Price, Daniel A. Johnson and Zachary M. LeVasseur spent nearly two months interviewing George N. Leighton, a 98-year-old black criminal and civil rights attorney and retired federal judge, about significant aspects of his life and career.

By Amanda Robert
Law Bulletin staff writer

Jenner & Block LLP partner Jeffrey D. Colman met George N. Leighton nearly 30 years ago when he tried a case in front of him as a young lawyer.

Colman and others in the Chicago legal community now want an author to publish a biography of Leighton, a 98-year-old black criminal and civil rights attorney and retired federal judge. In January, they took the first step by recruiting a group of Jenner & Block associates to record Leighton's personal and professional memories.

"He was so kind and wonderful to young lawyers that I've wanted younger

lawyers to continue to have opportunities to meet him, learn from him and be inspired by him," Colman said. "Jerry Solovy, Tony Valukas, Tom Sullivan and I, and a number of other people outside of Jenner & Block like Langdon Neal at Neal & Leroy and members of George's family all agreed we should go through this process of having our younger lawyers research aspects of George's life, prepare outlines for interviews and then record those interviews."

Five associates spent nearly two months with Leighton. Their final DVD contains 30 hours of interviews, which they plan to provide to a biographer.

Jenner – page 22

Jenner

Continued from page 3

Whitney B. Price interviewed Leighton about his childhood in New Bedford, Mass., where he was born to Cape Verdean immigrants in 1912. She heard that he won a scholarship to Howard University, even though he never graduated from high school, and later served in the military during World War II and graduated from Harvard Law School.

Price also recorded Leighton's memories of coming to Chicago in October 1946. At the time, he couldn't rent an office downtown or join The Chicago Bar Association.

"He has a phrase that he says ... 'What you have to do is make up your mind, and you don't let anyone steer you from your objective,'" she said. "In every part of his life, every section of the five that we covered, there are these incredible obstacles. And instead of being cowed by those, or instead of being angered or getting bitter, even fighting in a way that wasn't graceful or elegant, he used his reason to get where he needed to go."

Thomas A. Bousnakis interviewed Leighton about civil rights cases early in his career. In one of those cases, Leighton successfully challenged an amendment to the Alabama state constitution that required residents to pass a test before they could vote.

"For a lawyer just starting his career, Judge Leighton's career is incredibly inspiring," Bousnakis said. "It's hard sometimes coming to work day after day to realize what the bigger picture is — why are we in this game in the first place?"

"But there's Judge Leighton, a new lawyer taking the train down to Mobile, Ala., to fight for people's rights and to do all of these really important and really critical cases."

Daniel A. Johnson interviewed Leighton about civil rights cases in the 1950s, including the Goldsby case, in which he represented a black man in Mississippi who was convicted by a jury that systematically excluded blacks.

"With regards to the Goldsby litigation in particular, he pulled every sort of play in the playbook in order to try to get a new trial for Goldsby, through several habeas actions, state and federal, many appeals, and all the way to the Supreme Court," Johnson said. "The lesson of that was just don't give up."

Brian H. Rowe researched Leighton's work on six other cases involving the death penalty, constitutional rights or fairness in the justice system. He heard that

Leighton handled each of those cases on a pro bono basis.

"That was one of the most important lessons I learned — the amazing experience he acquired volunteering his time to advocate for indigent individuals or individuals who didn't otherwise have an adequate representative," he said.

Zachary M. LeVasseur finished the project by talking to Leighton about his time on the bench, starting with his election to the Cook County Circuit Court in 1964 through his appointment to the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois in 1976. He also interviewed him about his retirement and practice with Neal & Leroy LLC.

"It's amazing what he accomplished considering where he started ... someone else would've not even tried," LeVasseur said. "He's just a remarkably kind, thoughtful person. He has a great sense of humor. He lights up the entire room."

For Leighton, the project became important since he's worked to collect materials from his life for several years.

"Tom Sullivan is a very good friend of mine, and he's been after me to write a memoir," Leighton said. "I was practicing law, so to take time out to write a memoir was not easy ... but now I have the time."

Leighton said he hopes he taught the five associates some of the things professors don't teach in law school.

"I went to Chicago, where I didn't have any friends or kinfolk, and I took a chance," he said. "In large measure, I consider myself having succeeded."

E-mail: arobert@lbpc.com