



Photo by David Durochik. Illustration by Andy Shaw.

Chicago Lawyer's 2011 Person of the Year

George N. Leighton

This year, *Chicago Lawyer* chose 99-year-old George N. Leighton as its 2011 Person of the Year, celebrating the legendary black judge and lawyer for 60-plus years of service to the legal profession. To read more about Leighton and his life, see page 24.

His friends and colleagues joined in honoring him, reflecting on how he impacted their careers and lives. Here is what they said:

In his recent book about Americans traveling to Paris in the 19th century, David McCullough reports on a Fourth of July celebration in 1832 honoring General Lafayette. In proposing a toast to the general, the artist and inventor Samuel F. B. Morse said that some men are “like the buoys upon tide-water ... They float up and down as the current sets this way

or that. If you ask at an emergency where they are, we cannot tell you. We must first consult the almanac. We must know the quarter of the moon, the way of the wind, the time of the tide ... But our guest ... is a tower amid the waters. He stands there now, the winds have swept by him, the waves have dashed around him, the snows of winter have lighted upon him, but still he is there.”

George Leighton is a tower amid the waters. As a young lawyer in Chicago in the late 1940s, George was the subject of blatant race discrimination. Because of the color of his skin, George could not join the American Bar Association or The Chicago Bar Association, he could not rent office space in most buildings in the Loop, he could not eat in many restaurants and taxi drivers refused to transport him. But he stood

firm as those winds of racism swept by him, and he stood resolute as the waves of bigotry dashed around him.

I did not know George in the 1940s, but I had the great fortune to meet George in 1977, when Tom Sullivan and I tried a criminal case in front of the judge. It was my first federal court trial and I was nervous. Judge Leighton treated me with incredible kindness. I never will forget it, or be able to repay him for that kindness and for the many other kindnesses he has shown me and my family since 1977.

After the trial was over, I received telephone calls from Judge Leighton asking me how I was, what I was doing in the practice of law, and — always — whether I was doing pro bono work and playing chess. Every call carried his deep and sonorous voice. Every call

feature < Person of the Year

was characterized by his kindness, humility and questions about me and my family.

When the judge heard that my son Matt was born in 1984, the questions about chess redoubled. When I saw the judge on the street, he would ask about Matt, and whether I was teaching him how to play chess. When I said that I hoped to do so, I would receive chess magazines in the mail from the judge and I would get calls suggesting chess instructors.

When Matt graduated from college, he was admitted to George's alma matter, Harvard Law School. The night before Matt started school, George, then at his home in Plymouth, Mass., said he needed to take Matt and me to the Daniel Webster Inn to celebrate Matt's introduction to law school. That dinner was one of the most memorable events in my life. George spoke — mainly to Matt — about what it was like to be a black man at Harvard Law School in 1940. Without any bitterness or rancor, George described his law school days, his time in the segregated military during World War II and the trials and tribulations of being a young African-American lawyer in Chicago in the late 1940s and 1950s.

I have had the great opportunity to introduce George to hundreds of young law students and lawyers, and I have watched as leaders in our community showered their awards and praises on George Leighton. I marveled — and continue to marvel — at his kind, caring, gracious and humble self.

Earlier this year, together with some friends and colleagues, I was privileged to join George in a meeting with Governor Quinn. The governor was reflecting upon his decision whether to sign into law legislation abolishing the death penalty. George was by design the last of seven speakers to address the governor. With his great voice, and never losing eye contact with the governor, George said, "I sit before you in the role of a beggar; I am here to beg and implore you to sign this legislation, and bring the state of Illinois back into the civilized world." The winds swept by, the waves dashed around, and the snows lighted upon him. But George Leighton — as always — sat tall and firm as a tower amid the waters.

Jeffrey D. Colman

Partner, Jenner & Block

•••

He's about as dignified as any man or woman I've ever met. He reached high judicial office

and did so under a life that was extraordinary. It was a lifetime that is so extraordinary that it almost sounds like it couldn't be true, but it is true. I was there, and I'll tell you that it was true.

He was such a wonderful role model. He was one of my teachers in law school, and his effect on people that I went to law school with was simply that this man was something extraordinary.

As a young circuit court judge, he presided over a case in which two policemen were injured. The question was whether they were injured in self-defense or not.

I was in his class when that case occurred. We had a big lecture hall. It was a freshman course for criminal law. He stopped one night at the end of class and said, "I'm going to tell you now about the case you're reading about in the newspaper." He told us he wanted to tell the class what had happened in the case and why it was decided the way it was decided.

He began to tell his side of the story, and as he did, students from other classes began to come into the back of the hall. When they saw who was speaking, they wanted to be part of it. At the end of his explanation, which was, amongst other things, a tremendous teaching tool, he ended his talk and stood up to leave the room. He got a standing ovation from the students.

It was an event that just struck me. It wasn't just a bunch of law students taking the law professor's side. It was far more than that.

I just think of the way he handled himself during this tough period that was going on in his life. When he was first questioned as to what he did and why he did it, he stood up like a man and he told them why he did it.

Whenever I had problems along that line, I remembered to do what was right and tell the truth about what was going on. You want to tell people, remember this guy. This guy knew how to do it. He did it right. And he did it under the most difficult circumstances imaginable. He didn't get anyone paving the way for him. He did it every second for himself.

From one long-ago friend, I just can't tell you how much he impacted my life. But he did. He had a big part in it.

Thomas R. Fitzgerald

Former Chief Justice, Illinois Supreme Court

•••

"He is the most remarkable lawyer or judge I have ever known." That is my quote from

a 2010 *Chicago Lawyer* article concerning George Leighton's legal career. In my 55 years of practice, I have had the good fortune to be associated with many outstanding lawyers and judges. How, then, could I have confidently made the above statement? The answer is that George Leighton simply is *sui generis*. He has risen from abject poverty and the burdens of racism to great triumphs, including important civil rights victories, a federal district court judgeship and top awards too numerous to count.

George Leighton was born 99 years ago in New Bedford, Mass., to a family of Portuguese-speaking Cape Verdeans. Because his parents and all the children were required to work in cranberry bogs and strawberry patches, he could only attend school during the nonpicking season. Accordingly, he was compelled to drop out of school having only advanced to the sixth-grade level. Years later, now self-taught, he was admitted conditionally to Howard University on scholarship, where he graduated Phi Beta Kappa and proceeded from there to a full scholarship at Harvard Law School. Following military service in the South Pacific as a captain in an all-Negro division, he returned to complete his Harvard law career and then chose to move to Chicago, a city he had never visited, because it was the only city that had elected a black man to the U.S. Congress.

I first met George Leighton in the mid-'60s when he was recruited by Maurice Rosenfield, an ardent opponent of the death penalty and "of counsel" to our firm. Mr. Rosenfield wanted Mr. Leighton to represent a white resident of a downstate Illinois community who had been convicted of a horrible rape-murder of a young white girl and was facing imminent execution. George Leighton became convinced by the evidence that the man was innocent and agreed to represent him on a last-minute motion for stay of execution. A new trial was ordered and the man was eventually freed, a legal accomplishment reported in a 1964 issue of *Look* magazine.

I again met George later in the '60s. By then he was a federal judge. He had joined with a number of Chicago's senior partners of leading firms (including Bert Jenner of Jenner & Block and Ed Stephan of Mayer Brown & Platt) to form the Legal Opportunity Scholarship Program. They asked that I and some

Person of the Year > feature



(From left to right) Andrea L. Zopp, president and CEO of the Chicago Urban League; Judge Ann Claire Williams, 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals; and Langdon D. Neal, principal and owner of Neal & Leroy. Photo by Lisa Predko.

other legal associates assist them in interviewing and recommending for grants minority law school applicants under that newly formed program of which they were directors. I was again impressed by Judge Leighton from our earliest LOSP meeting. Despite his own extraordinary accomplishments, he obviously strained to not hold the minority applicants to his own remarkable standards. However, at the same time, he was often more critical than the white board members in evaluating perceived flawed character traits.

Therefore, as stated, since the early '60s I have had the good fortune to number Judge Leighton among my most treasured friends. In recent years Judge Marvin Aspen and I have scheduled regular lunches with Judge Leighton at least every three or four months. After each of such gatherings, Judge Aspen and I would marvel at the inexhaustible supply of remarkable personal accomplishments we had not previously known about.

At one such lunch, I invited Judge Leighton to attend a meeting I was convening at our law firm to honor another famous nonagenarian, Leon Despres, at a roast on his 100th birthday. When I mentioned that Leon intended to serve as his own defense counsel, Judge Leighton strenuously objected. "Leon deserves

a younger defense counsel, and since I am 95 years young, I will defend him," insisted Judge Leighton. Needless to say, Leon was acquitted.

And now, as Judge Leighton enters his own 100th year, his legion of admirers look forward to a continuation of his unflinching integrity and curiosity — all offered with a keen sense of humor.

Ronald S. Miller
Partner, Miller Shakman & Beem

• • •

I first met George Leighton nearly five decades ago when, after law school graduation, I served as an assistant state's attorney for Cook County in the Appeals Division. One of my first assignments was a case where George was opposing counsel and was appealing the conviction of a client. I do not recall whether that particular case was a paying client or one representing a defendant pro bono.

As an assistant state's attorney, I handled several other matters where George was opposing counsel, representing both paid and unpaid clients. George was always a tenacious advocate in the best sense of the term. Every client had a full and vigorous representation, regardless of how unattractive the client or heinous the crime. George was thoroughly

prepared both as to the law and the facts. He was ever relentless, but at the same time, he always kept his interpersonal relationships with opposing counsel professional and cordial. In short, he was the personification of the ideal advocate.

Through the years, our paths crossed frequently and I had the good fortune to get to know George well. We served together on a small committee appointed by the Illinois Supreme Court to revise the Illinois Criminal Code. The committee met regularly, where I had the opportunity to observe further George's intellect and character.

Years later when I joined the federal bench, George became my colleague. His willingness to share the federal judicial expertise with a new colleague, his practical advice and his comradeship enriched our relationship.

When George retired from the federal bench and resumed the practice of law, regular contact continued. To this day, we still lunch together, most of the time at the Union League Club, several times a year.

Of all the lawyers and judges I have known during my personal career, George is one of the very most memorable. His enthusiasm for the practice of law, the principles of our Constitution and the rule of law have not diminished one iota in all these years. He appears as mentally sharp and engaged today, after recently celebrating his 99th birthday, as he was the day I first met him. He has deservedly become an iconic legend of the Chicago bench and bar.

Marvin E. Aspen
Senior Judge, U.S. District Court for
the Northern District of Illinois

• • •

My first encounter with the judge was as a student in the early 1970s at The John Marshall Law School. He taught my criminal law class. The judge had a tremendous impact on me. I remember his unwavering passion for making certain that people from all walks of life would receive fair treatment. He believed every person, regardless of their station in life, was entitled to justice under the law. I believe that passion for fairness and justice is what I and many others consider the judge's legacy to the law.

After law school when I was doing criminal appellate work as a JAG officer in the Army, I tried to always relate what the judge had

feature < Person of the Year

taught me about concern for others into the work I did for my clients.

I also knew Judge Leighton as a close friend of my uncle, Noble W. Lee, who was dean of The John Marshall Law School. The judge's interest in accessibility to the law took a different tact when he worked with Dean Lee to make certain that law school opportunities would be open to all. At that time, in the early 1970s, the American Bar Association believed that the only true law school experience could come through full-time law school curriculums affiliated with universities. John Marshall had offered an evening curriculum since its founding in 1899 to make certain that persons from every walk of life could study the law and become practicing attorneys.

At the urging of Dean Lee, Judge Leighton was elected to serve on the Council of the First Section of the ABA as it updated its law school accreditation rules. It was Judge Leighton who convinced the ABA that evening programs were just as viable as a full-time, university-affiliated program. He served on that ABA committee for 10 years (1970-1980). The ABA today recognizes and accredits evening or part-time law school programs.

As president of The John Marshall Law School Foundation, I can say it has been a pleasure to work with Judge Leighton as we established in 2010 the Leighton Fellowship for the Study of Prisoners' Rights and the "George N. Leighton Equal Justice Award" for his commitment to securing equal justice under the law. It is an honor to know him and to give him the respect he so justly deserves.

John R. Lee

*President, John Marshall Law School
Foundation*

• • •

"The important thing is to have a goal and to not let anything drive you away from that goal."

Those were George Leighton's words when the post office was dedicated in his honor in his hometown of New Bedford, Mass. And those are the words that have inspired one of the most extraordinary human beings that this country has produced.

I first met George Leighton when I appeared before him as a young assistant U.S. attorney. I was in awe. His booming voice, his elegant stature, his quick mind and his commanding presence created an amazing atmo-

sphere in his courtroom. I was fascinated and mesmerized. And I quickly learned that when I went to his courtroom, I had better be extremely prepared. He did not tolerate fools or those who did not know their cases. I sat there during that first call and sensed that I was in the presence of a judicial icon and trailblazer.

The more I learned about him, the more my first impression of him was confirmed. He had such humble beginnings, from picking berries in the bogs, to cooking on a ship and in restaurants, to running the men's dorm while at Howard. He had no high school diploma. Yet he set his goals high and graduated from Howard magna cum laude and Harvard Law School. He represented the poorest among us, the disenfranchised and many criminal defendants. He never forgot his roots in his quest for justice and in his ultimate goal of equal justice. For at his core is a fundamental recognition of the value of each human being and the right to be treated fairly. The humility, kindness and respect that are his hallmarks commit him to treat janitorial staff with the same dignity as presidents.

For a man with so many firsts, including being the first African-American to serve on the Illinois Appellate Court and on the CBA Board of Managers, he has also dedicated his life to making sure he would not be the last. He paved the way for so many of us, of all races and creeds, to follow in his footsteps, and he embraced the responsibility of passing on the blessings he has received. He has counseled innumerable young people, law students and lawyers and not just on the law, but on chess and life in general. He showed me and many other new district judges what it was to be a just judge, and I was so honored when he administered the oath of office to me.

Today that oath — "to do equal right to the poor and to the rich" — is ever present on my mind as I sit on the U.S. 7th Circuit Court of Appeals. And I am constantly reminded of George's words that being a judge means "the community trusts you to be an administrator of justice." I know that I am blessed to have George Leighton in my life, and I will always strive to live up to his wise counsel and extraordinary legacy.

Ann Claire Williams

Judge, 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals

• • •

I have known George Leighton for over 45

years. We first met in the 1950s, when he was defending state court criminal defendants, many of whom were indigent, at 26th and California. After he became a judge, I tried cases before him in the circuit court's Chancery Division and the federal district court. When he retired from the bench, we tried a lengthy criminal case together in the district court. But most significantly, we became close friends.

My friendship with George has been a highlight of my time at the bar. He is unique in the real sense of that word — not just a great lawyer and judge, but a precious jewel of a person, a mensch, a man of integrity and honor, with a heart of gold, an inner dedication to assist those in need of help.

George's life story is the stuff of a best-selling biography — his journey from the cranberry bogs of Massachusetts to Howard University without having graduated from high school; his entry into Harvard Law School after graduating from Howard with honors, interrupted for service in the South Pacific during World War II, discharged as captain; his coming to Chicago upon graduation from Harvard, at a time when African-American lawyers could not join The Chicago Bar Association or rent an office in the Loop; his rise as a young lawyer to the very top of the Chicago criminal defense bar; his work with Bob Ming, Thurgood Marshall and other NAACP leaders on civil cases involving racial discrimination and on criminal cases, many involving the death penalty; his distinguished service on state and federal benches — it goes on and on.

In one of his most fascinating cases — which affords an insight into the deplorable situation facing persons of color in Chicago — he was defendant instead of defense lawyer, indicted for incitement of a riot in Cicero. He had the temerity to advise a family that they had a right to occupy an apartment they had rented, but when they attempted to move in, violence erupted by local white residents, outraged at the notion that a person with dark skin would presume to live in their community. (On defense motion, the indictment was dismissed.)

George's connection to others spans the years. He gives an annual talk to the law students hired for the summer at our firm. He is consistently voted the speaker most admired — by young men and women 50 to 70 years younger than he.

Person of the Year > feature

There's something extraordinarily special about George, difficult to express in writing, but apparent upon meeting and getting to know him and experiencing his courtly, gentle, deferential, friendly, good-humored manner.

As the Bard put it, "When comes such another?"

Thomas P. Sullivan

Partner, Jenner & Block

•••

Judge Leighton influenced my career in two ways. First, I became aware of his career as a civil rights lawyer after I began dating Barbara in the early 1970s. I then decided to apply for law school and become a lawyer, which is something I had not thought of doing prior to that.

Second, I was working full time as a police supervisor for the General Services Administration (GSA) when I started law school at Northwestern in 1974. GSA is the federal agency that provides security and police for all federal buildings. I was also a firearms instructor for GSA's Federal Protective Service and was working about 60 to 70 hours a week during my first year (1974) of law school. I decided I was going to stop law school after my first year because of the heavy work schedule and resume law school later. I went to see Judge Leighton (who was then an appellate judge) to get his opinion on this.

I came to his chambers about 5:30 p.m. and he told me to come in. He then proceeded to tell me how he never attended high school and how he got admitted to Howard University. He then told me how he got admitted to Harvard Law School. This was the first I heard about his not going to high school, or how he got into Howard and Harvard. He talked about 20 or 30 minutes, and then asked what I came to see him about.

I decided that I was not going to tell him I was dropping out of law school because my reasons did not seem as sound after hearing the difficulties he faced just getting into Howard and Harvard. So I just said I had dropped by to say hello. I then made up my mind to stick with it. I graduated from law school on schedule in 1977.

I think that if I had not gone to see him at that point in time, and heard his remarkable story, I probably would have dropped out of law school after my first year.

Robert D. Whitfield

Attorney, Central Advisory Council

Leighton's son-in-law

•••

I have known and admired George Leighton for nearly a half century. We met in Springfield when the two of us had a murder case before the Supreme Court on the same day.

He was a magnificent appellate lawyer but then he was magnificent at whatever he did: trial lawyer, orator, writer, teacher and chess-master. He was at home in the state and federal systems and on any level of courts or cases. And, not incidentally, he was a true friend and a great human being.

His decision to practice law in Chicago has been a boon to this city and state for all these years; thank God he is still here to remind us of what a lawyer and gentleman should be.

It is hard to think of anyone who came as close to being a self-made success and, in the process, shown so many other people of what a true professional should be. He is a living legend and he honors us every day he is with us. And he deserves our honor and profound respect.

So — to George Leighton — with admiration and love!

William J. Bauer

Judge, 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals

•••

I came to work for Judge Leighton 30 years ago in 1981. It was my first job right out of law school. The clerkship with Judge Leighton was the reason I moved to Chicago.

Judge Leighton was always a little formal, but stately and gracious. One of the things that I loved most about him and learned from him is that he loved and truly respected the law. He respected and valued our system of laws and the rule of law. He loved discussing cases and the application of law to the various facts that we were presented with. He saw the law as vibrant and living and the method to manage and govern interactions in our society.

He also willingly shared his love for the law with others and he was a great teacher. He regularly called his law clerks to sit in court with him to see an interesting issue be argued or to hear a very talented attorney make a presentation.

One of my favorite times that he did this was when the Bee Gees were in his court as the defendants in a civil intellectual property law-

suit involving the song "How Deep Is Your Love." The Bee Gees had a high-powered law firm from New York representing them. They were getting spanked in the courtroom by a solo practitioner who was representing the plaintiff and was a great trial lawyer. It was very entertaining to watch. Although I did have to hear the song "How Deep Is Your Love" about 1,000 times, which is 990 times too many.

He also gave his law clerks a lot of freedom in writing first drafts of opinions, which really helped us develop our own analytical and writing skills.

Judge Leighton is a true gentleman. He treats everyone with respect and warmth. He also is a wonderful storyteller and he has a few stories to tell. He has had a remarkable career, which has been inspirational for me since I first met him over 30 years ago.

I think one of my greatest gifts as a lawyer was the opportunity to work for him. My own appreciation and respect for the law and its power were enhanced in my time with him as were my legal skills. Judge Leighton is someone whom I deeply respect, admire and love. I am truly blessed to know him.

Andrea L. Zopp

President & CEO, Chicago Urban League

•••

I was in my first year of law school at Northwestern in the spring of 1965 when a notice went up on the board that a local state court judge was coming to speak about a controversial case.

I went and it turned out that the judge was Judge Leighton, who spoke about the case in which he ruled that a defendant was engaging in self-defense when he used a broken bottle in a struggle with, I believe, plainclothes police officers who were trying to arrest him. I don't remember what Judge Leighton said that day, but I was impressed that he would come to speak to students on a matter like this and have remembered the occasion for these many years.

There was quite a public outcry over Judge Leighton's decision, and calls in the legislature and elsewhere for action, but the matter died down after a reasonable interval. This may have been because the 1960s were just about to get underway with all the advances in civil rights and the marches and vivid images of police dogs and water hoses being used against

marchers in the South and landmark U.S. Supreme Court cases. But Judge Leighton continued to advance in his judicial career, ultimately being appointed to the federal bench.

I next met Judge Leighton when I came to teach at The John Marshall Law School and the judge was teaching a night course he created called Prisoners' Rights, which was one of the most popular electives at the school.

The previous year, the judge had been asked, by then Dean Noble Lee, to come to the annual meeting of the American Bar Association's section on legal education. When the judge arrived at the meeting, he was told by then "campaign manager," Dean Lee, that he would be nominated and elected the next day as chair of the ABA Section on Legal Education. This in fact occurred and for the next year, Judge Leighton served with distinction as the chair of the section.

Two years ago when the judge was being honored at the Unity Dinner in Chicago, a celebration of diversity of leadership in local bar organizations, I called him at his home in Massachusetts to confirm final details. He said all was well but that they had had a lot of snow up there and that on the previous day, when his cousin had come by in a car to pick him up, the way to his house was blocked. So, he had to walk several furlongs to the edge of his property and then drop down a 10-foot snow bank to get to his ride. I remember thinking at that time that I hoped he did not have to do that again until after the dinner.

I have known Judge Leighton now for many years. I feel very lucky to be able to call him my friend.

John E. Corkery

Dean, The John Marshall Law School

•••

"Lawyer Nancy." I heard these words for the first time almost 25 years into my legal career and was never before so proud of being a lawyer.

A quirk in Illinois' admission rules at the time required me to take the Illinois bar exam in the summer of 2009. Throughout a summer of "refreshing my memory," studying for the bar, wondering if I had bumped up against a point of cognitive overload, one person made it clear to me that learning never stops and that I was, in an odd way, fortunate to have the opportunity to be studying the basics once again.

That person, Judge George N. Leighton, was not only my cheerleader, but also my inspiration. The day I passed the bar exam, Judge Leighton renamed me: "Lawyer Nancy." Every time I hear it — from that booming, joyful voice — I am reminded of how fortunate I am to be a lawyer and that greatness in the legal profession comes not just from a brilliant legal mind (which George Leighton clearly has), but also from years of undiminished commitment and caring and inspiring others to do the same.

I only met George Leighton about 12 years ago. I was new to Chicago and hopeful of finding acceptance in the Chicago legal community. I assumed that I would meet people and work hard, and over time, I would find ways to become involved and to earn respect of the community. I did not expect that people who did not know me or my work would greet me as warmly as they did.

I expected even less that someone of the stature of Judge Leighton would be among the most inviting and encouraging. The warmth of his interest and encouragement have been a guiding light for me since our first meeting when I was awestruck and he had no particular reason to reach out in kindness as he did.

In discussing law with Judge Leighton I have learned much. But I have learned even more being guided by his great humanity. So, when I hear myself called "Lawyer Nancy," it is the greatest of recognition and the greatest of inspirations.

Nancy C. Loeb

*Visiting assistant law professor,
Northwestern University*

By Amanda Robert

This is a portion of the article about George N. Leighton that originally appeared in the July 2010 *Chicago Lawyer*. We kept the facts the same as they were at the time that the story ran.

•••

When George N. Leighton moved to Chicago in October 1946, he couldn't eat in restaurants. He couldn't stay in hotels. He couldn't catch a cab in the Loop.

Leighton, a decorated World War II hero and a Harvard Law School graduate, couldn't even rent an office downtown or join The Chicago Bar Association. Just because he's black.

"Naturally, black lawyers didn't have the op-

portunity that white lawyers had, no matter what law school they went to," Leighton said. "I went to one of the best law schools in America, but that didn't make any difference.

"Despite what I've said, I lived through it."

Leighton, now 97, has spent nearly 40 years in private practice, representing clients, often without pay, in criminal and civil rights cases. In his career, he defended more than 200 criminal cases in bench and jury trials and handled more than 175 appeals or reviews, civil and criminal, in state and federal courts.

In 1951, he founded Moore, Ming and Leighton, which became one of the largest predominantly black law firms in the country. He became active in the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois and served as general counsel and president of the Chicago Branch of the NAACP, fighting for blacks in Illinois and the South in cases involving voting rights, integrated schools, open housing and equal access to jury service.

In one case, Leighton traveled to Georgia to represent the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. In another case, Thurgood Marshall, the first black person to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, traveled from New York to defend Leighton against criminal charges in Chicago.

Leighton served five years as a Cook County circuit judge, seven years as an Illinois Appellate Court justice and 11 years as a U.S. District Court judge in the Northern District of Illinois. He joined The John Marshall Law School as an adjunct professor in 1965. He taught classes in criminal law and procedure, as well as in prisoners' rights, until 2004. Early in his teaching career, he helped persuade the American Bar Association to continue accrediting evening law school programs. Leighton joined Neal & Leroy as of counsel in 1987.

The leading man

Leighton was born in October 1912 in New Bedford, Mass. — an area he affectionately calls "Moby Dick country." His parents immigrated from the Cape Verde Islands off Africa; from March to November, they worked alongside Leighton and his brothers and sisters in the cranberry bogs.

He spoke Crioulo, a Portuguese dialect, at home, and he attended school for only a few months each year, but Leighton said he never lost the hope of becoming educated. In 1929, while in the seventh grade, he took a job as a

Person of the Year > feature

ship cook's assistant on an oil tanker that sailed from Cape Cod to Aruba. After three years, he returned to New Bedford and enrolled in correspondence and night school classes.

Leighton moved to Boston and worked in restaurant kitchens until 1935, when he entered an essay contest that promised two \$200 scholarships to children of Cape Verdean descent who attended public school in New Bedford.

Leighton won the contest, but since he had not graduated from high school, the scholarship foundation told him that he would receive the first \$100 if a college accepted him and the second \$100 if he passed his first semester.

He applied to Howard University in Washington, D.C., and, even though the school rejected his application, they allowed him to enter as an unclassified student in 1936. When he made the dean's honor roll in the first year, he received the rest of his scholarship. The school also agreed to make him a candidate for a degree in the College of Liberal Arts.

In 1940, he graduated magna cum laude from Howard with a degree in history and a scholarship to Harvard Law School.

In March 1942, after the onset of World War II, Leighton left Harvard Law and reported to active duty as an ROTC second lieutenant. He served for three years, rose to the rank of captain and returned to Harvard in October 1945. He finished his final two years in just 12 months and graduated with a law degree in October 1946.

"I knew that staying in Massachusetts wasn't worthwhile," he said. "Massachusetts is a state where stature, family, wealth and substance meant a lot. I had none of that. No one bothered to interview me."

Leighton chose Chicago, he said, when he discovered that it was the only city in America with a substantial black population that put a black person — William L. Dawson — in Congress.

Leighton found his first job with Christopher C. Wimbish, a black state senator who ran his own law practice. He said Wimbish asked him to go to court in his place, but told him he couldn't afford to give him a salary or

his own desk. Leighton said he made enough money in this "ad-hoc arrangement" to move his family from his in-laws' home in Washington, D.C., to a two-story house on South St. Louis Avenue in June 1947.

"That's how I started practicing law in Chicago," Leighton said. "I was always representing someone with no money, which is always a hard way to earn a living. But I was fortunate and things went my way."

A just cause

Leighton defended clients charged with violent offenses, such as assaults, rapes and murders, and worked with the NAACP and ACLU to represent clients in cases involving racial segregation and civil rights abuses.

Leighton said he considers the Harvey Clark case one of his most famous. In 1951, Clark, a black man and a veteran of World War II, rented an apartment in an all-white apartment building in Cicero. When the police refused to let Clark and his family in the building, he went to Leighton, who was then the chairman of the Legal Redress Committee of the Chicago Branch of the NAACP.

Leighton filed a lawsuit in federal court and obtained a mandatory injunction directing the town of Cicero and its police department to allow the Clark family to enter the building. When they returned to Cicero, Leighton said, the white crowd set the building on fire, forcing Gov. Adlai Stevenson to call in the Illinois National Guard.

When the Cook County state's attorney filed an indictment against Leighton for conspiracy to incite a riot, Marshall acted as Leighton's lead defense counsel. The court dismissed the indictment and Leighton filed a lawsuit on behalf of the Clarks for civil rights violations. They settled the lawsuit for nearly \$8,000, Leighton said, but the family never moved into the building.

Judgment call

One afternoon in 1964, Leighton received a call from Mayor Richard J. Daley. The mayor wanted to know if he would run for judge of the Cook County Circuit Court.

"I said facetiously that anyone who knew Chicago in 1964 would know that for a lawyer

to get a phone call from Mayor Richard J. Daley asking that lawyer if he would be willing to be a candidate was like that lawyer being elected in a landslide," Leighton said. "I was, in fact, elected by a landslide."

Leighton said he was one of 18 candidates on the ticket of the Democratic Party; he was the only black person on the ticket.

Leighton served in the criminal court for three years and, in 1967, he moved to the chancery division.

In 1969, the Illinois Supreme Court appointed him to fill a vacancy on the 1st District Appellate Court. In the next general election, he was elected to a 10-year term and served there until 1976, when President Gerald Ford appointed him to the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois. He retired in 1987.

Dan K. Webb, chairman of Winston & Strawn, first met Leighton when he was a "young pup of a lawyer" just out of law school. Webb, then an assistant U.S. attorney who appeared in Leighton's federal courtroom, said the judge impressed him.

"He was always on top of the law and the facts," he said. "More importantly, he was fair to all sides."

"He liked lawyers, he was respectful of lawyers and he enjoyed hearing arguments from lawyers."

Langdon D. Neal, a principal and owner of Neal & Leroy, now works with Leighton at his law firm.

Neal said Leighton represented blacks when there were very few blacks in the profession. He practiced during segregation, discrimination and exclusion, Neal said, and overcame those hurdles to become a "trailblazer."

"He's such an inspiration and a role model for the young attorneys," Neal said. "He sets the tone in everything he does that demands excellence."

"No work product leaves his desk that isn't perfect. It's that commitment to his work that we all strive for. We have a living role model for that. They're not just words. There is actually a person who embodies that every day of their life." ■

arobert@lbpc.com