

Raymond A. Brown, Pioneering Lawyer, Dies at 94

Before there was a formal organization in the state of New Jersey representing black attorneys, there was Ray Brown. One of the few African-Americans to be admitted to the state bar back in 1950, Brown garnered a reputation as a staunch civil rights advocate who traveled the country representing black clients, often at his own expense.

His distinguished law career spanned 59 years and it was during that time Brown developed a reputation as a fierce courtroom fighter and defense attorney who didn't mind taking on the most challenging cases. His client list over the years also included some historical figures, among them H. Rap Brown, the ex-Black Panther charged with killing a deputy; former boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter and Mario "Dr. X" Jascavech, the surgeon whose 1977 Bergen County murder case led to the jailing of New York Times reporter Myron A. Farber, who refused to reveal his sources or turn over his notes.

But Brown didn't just represent accused murderers. He also defended famous individuals like Sara Vaughn and Amiri Baraka and people charged with offenses ranging from white collar crimes to municipal corruption. Known for his courtroom theatrics and skilled oratory, Brown could be found standing before judges and juries representing those with absolutely no stature or money, part of his commitment to ensure everyone had an opportunity to pursue equal justice under the law.

"He was so committed to representing people regardless of what resources they had," said NCC founder Monsignor William J. Linder, who knew Brown for more than 40 years and considered him a friend.

Brown, who lived in Upper Montclair and practiced law with his son, Raymond M. Brown, passed away at age 94 from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease on Oct. 9. Friends and colleagues said his pioneering legal career paved the way for many black lawyers who would follow in his footsteps.

"Ray Brown was a pioneer in the area of the law and specifically criminal defense. He paved the way for African Americans to be able to make a living as attorneys in the area of private practice," said Raymond L. Hamlin, a founding partner in the Newark law firm of Hunt, Hamlin & Ridley. "He defined what it means to be a fearless advocate on behalf of clients. He never shied away from a fight even at a time when doing so could have jeopardized the safety of him and his family."

Gwendolyn Williams, president of the Garden State Bar Association, an organization comprised of approximately 1,000 African-American and other minority attorneys in New Jersey, called Brown "an attorney's attorney" whose "style and tactical cross examination of a witness would make you feel as if you were part of a suspense movie."

"As his cross examinations would build, he would rise and either approach the witness stand or stand by the jury rail closest to the audience, with his glasses either on top of his head or in his hand and a legal pad in the other hand," she recalled. "The jury and the audience would be captivated by his presence."

Born in Florida, Brown moved to New Jersey at an early age, settling in Jersey City with his family. He fought in World War II, becoming one of the first black officers to serve in President Harry Truman's desegregated army.

Brown graduated from Florida A & M University and he funded his law school education at Fordham Law School through the G.I. Bill and pay he received working as a longshoreman. Brown also served in the New Jersey National Guard and retired in the 1970s with the rank of colonel.



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