

George Leighton, criminal courthouse namesake, recalled as inspiration for generations: 'His work is enduring'



George Leighton, for whom the criminal courthouse at 26th Street and California Avenue was named, died on June 6, 2018. He was 105.

By **Patrick M. O'Connell and Ese Olumhense**
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In 1951, George Leighton, a lawyer at one of the city's premiere African-American law firms, represented a black bus driver who wanted to rent an apartment in Cicero. When the man and his family moved in, it enraged their white neighbors and a riot erupted, heavily damaging the building. The National Guard was mobilized to subdue an unrest that lingered for days.

Leighton, who spent a childhood plucking weeds from the cranberry bogs of Massachusetts before winning a scholarship to Howard University and graduating from Harvard Law School, was indicted and jailed for conspiracy to incite a riot for his role advocating for the black family.

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African-American on the U.S. Supreme Court, the charges were dismissed, but the ordeal left a

lasting impression on Leighton and shaped his long, groundbreaking and influential career.

“That was hard for him, but he knew he was doing what was right,” said [Andrea Zopp](#), president and CEO of World Business Chicago and a former federal and Cook County prosecutor who clerked for Leighton, then a federal judge, during the early 1980s. “It was the idea that there is power in the law and also that you stand up for what you believe in even if you have to put yourself at risk.”

Leighton, a pioneering giant of Chicago’s legal community who went on to become a Cook County judge, the first black appointed to the Illinois Appellate Court and a federal judge, died Wednesday at a veterans hospital in Brockton, Mass., the owner of his longtime law firm said. He was 105.

[Langdon Neal](#), managing member of Neal & Leroy, where Leighton worked until he was 99, said Leighton had been hospitalized for pneumonia.

Leighton was a mentor and inspiration for generations of Chicago lawyers, including former President Barack Obama. Cook County’s main criminal courthouse at 26th Street and California Avenue was named for him in 2012.

“He was the personification of fairness and justice and courageousness, all wrapped up in one garment,” said Cook County Chief Judge [Timothy Evans](#), who knew Leighton for years. “And he wore it well.”

Friends and colleagues described Leighton as tenacious but humble, self-effacing but resolute. He loved to walk, and could often be found strolling through the Loop or taking public transit to work.

As a judge at the courthouse later named in his honor, Leighton touched off an uproar in 1965 that led to an effort to remove him from the bench when he acquitted two Latino men of beating and slashing a Chicago police officer. Leighton stood his ground, finding that white police officers lied about what happened.

“I found those two young fellows not guilty because the officers were lying, and I told 'em so, that's all,” Leighton said at the 2012 dedication ceremony. “They tried to get me removed from the bench. Oh, they did everything they could. It didn't work.”

Zopp said Leighton was a role model, teacher and mentor for many in Chicago’s legal community, especially African-American lawyers, but also an inspiration for an entire community. He helped contribute to today’s diversity on the bench, she said, and affected how judges view cases and make decisions.

“I think he was incredibly important to the African-American community and to our progress,” Zopp said. “Even if some don’t recognize his name, his work is enduring. He moved the law forward and, secondly, he opened pathways for many people going forward.”

Neal said.

“If only all those men and women who walked through the doors of the Leighton courthouse knew his story,” Neal said.

The child of immigrants from the Cape Verde Island, Leighton’s farm work as a boy and a teenager kept him out of school for months, and he was still in seventh grade at age 17 when he left Massachusetts to work on an oil tanker sailing for the Dutch West Indies. But since he was 12, during the back-breaking work of picking berries, he had yearned to become a lawyer. Despite a sporadic formal education, he was an avid reader, a chess player and a talented writer. And so in 1936, at age 24, he entered a writing essay competition to Howard, winning a scholarship.

He excelled at Howard, graduating with a history degree, and was accepted to Harvard Law School on a scholarship after working his connections and speaking with the dean. In 1942, he was called into service in World War II, serving as an ROTC second lieutenant in the segregated 93rd Infantry Division. That same year he married his wife, Virginia, who died in 1992 shortly before their 50th anniversary. The couple had two daughters and five grandchildren.

Leighton was discharged in 1945 with the rank of captain, finished law school and passed the bar at 34. He decided to move to Chicago, a city he had never visited and where he knew no one, because it had elected an African-American attorney, William Dawson, to the U.S. House that same year, a former law partner said.

Leighton arrived in Chicago as a newly minted lawyer in 1946 at a time when African-Americans weren't allowed to join bar associations or rent office space downtown. He quickly built a reputation with his sharp legal mind and meticulous attention to detail — which extended to his perfectly pressed clothes.

Five years later, he worked on the Cicero case, saying the family had a constitutional right to move into the neighborhood. The case was one of the first of many civil rights cases Leighton handled in the 1950s and 60s, when he represented black clients in matters of voting rights, school and housing segregation and the right to serve on juries.

“It was an incident that brought mistreatment into sharp focus,” Evans said.

The indictment and brief time behind bars had a profound effect on Leighton, Zopp and Evans said. Zopp remembers him recounting the events during her time as a clerk. Evans recalls Leighton, after an award ceremony the two attended, asking the judge if he could uncover the original file on the case, especially proud that Marshall was listed in court documents as his attorney.

Leighton went on to become a leader in the Chicago office of the NAACP at a time when Marshall worked in the New York office.

“It’s one thing to want to become a lawyer to change the work you do in your life, it’s quite another to see what you can do for yourselves,” Evans said.

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In addition to his work in Chicago, Leighton often traveled to Mississippi and other parts of the South, where he helped residents with free legal counsel, Evans said, especially on civil rights matters.

After his time as a prominent defense attorney in the 1940s and 50s, Leighton became a judge in Cook County, then barrier-breaking jurist on the state appellate court.

He served on the federal bench for more than a decade. He retired in 1987 when he was 74, then returned to private practice. Into his 90s, he could sometimes be seen doing push-ups from his office floor, Evans said.

Leighton was eager to teach and mentor young lawyers, Zopp said, often calling clerks into the courtroom for intriguing cases or exchanges and sharing wisdom.

“He loved the law. You couldn’t work for him and not have a true appreciation of what the rule of law meant to being a true, democratic society,” Zopp said.

In a Wednesday night [tweet](#), Cook County State’s Attorney Kim Foxx offered her condolences to Leighton’s family.

“I’m deeply saddened to learn of Judge George Leighton’s passing. I’m thinking first of his family — but also of his extraordinary legacy as both an advocate and an example for black Chicagoans. He will be missed by many.”

Zopp said Leighton’s life, rising from the New England cranberry fields to become one of the city’s most influential jurists, “was a truly American story.”

“His,” she said, her voice cracking, “was a life well-lived.”

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