

# Maurice Grant

## Shattering Perceptions in the Legal Industry

by Dustin J. Seibert

Maurice Grant draws several parallels with the late, great attorney Johnnie Cochran.

Grant has a commanding personality, a flashy sense of dress (fine, tailored suits), and a megawatt smile. That personality informs everything he does, not the least of which is being the face of **Grant Law, LLC**, a six-attorney shop that he founded in January 2015.

The multi-service litigation and transactional firm is much smaller than a lot of firms that have a roster of Fortune 500 clients that rival those of Grant Law LLC, including Wal-Mart, Allstate and Northern Trust Corporation, through which Grant completed the loan documentation to establish the Noble Network of Charter Schools, the first charter school network in downtown Chicago. But his firm's relatively diminutive size fuels Grant to provide client service that rivals those of exponentially larger shops.

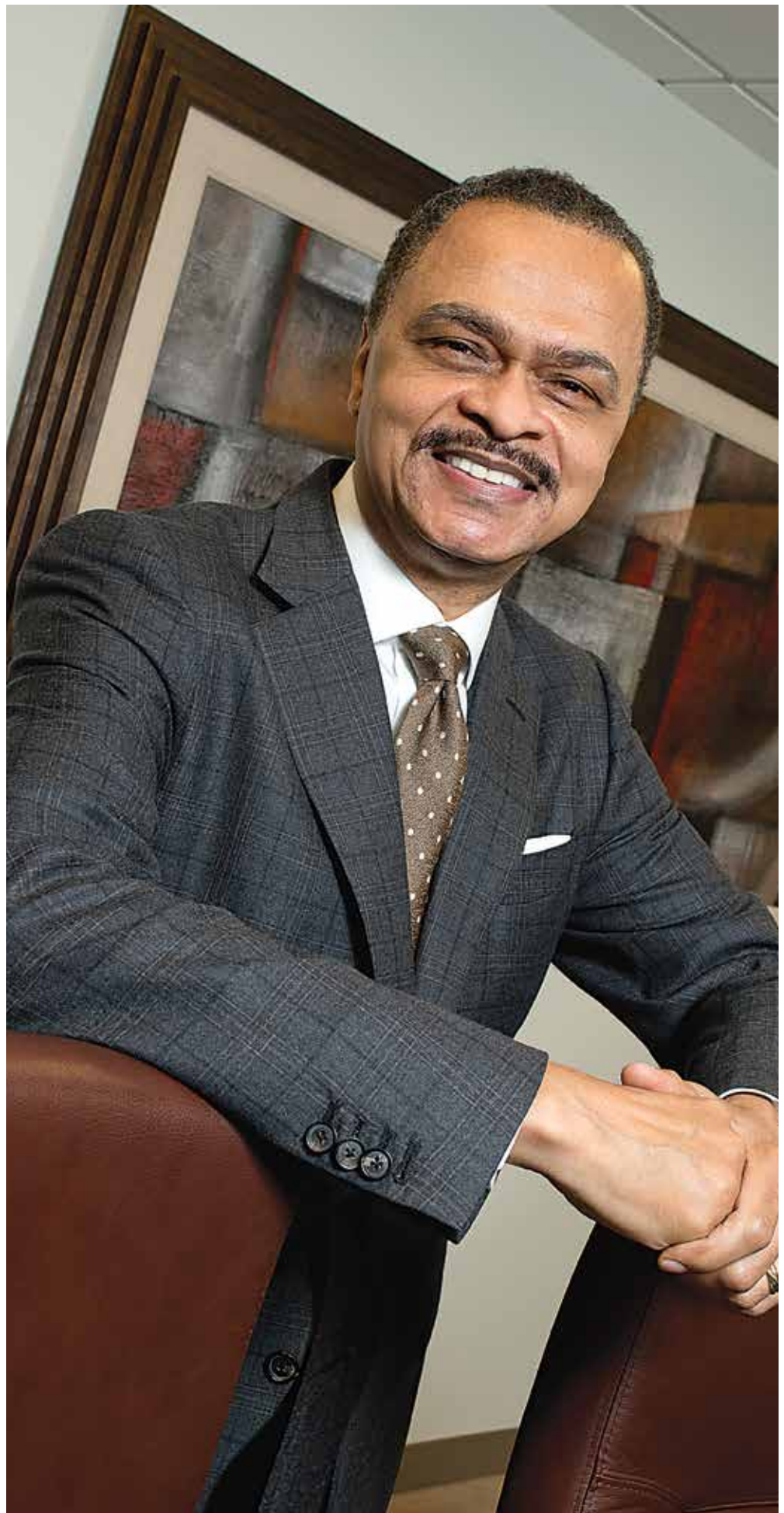
"Doing what we do provides an opportunity for everyone to realize that it can be done," he says. "Because right now, there seems to be a perception that there's an exclusivity to it, and that motivates me."

Grant's longtime friend, Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila LLP co-founder Patricia Brown Holmes, says Grant's motivation begets a tenacity that makes him a formidable foe in the courtroom or on the other side of a deal.

"If you're a client who wants someone who'll definitely have your back, it's him," Holmes says. "He's not afraid or tentative about anything. At the same time, he'll give you the last penny in his pocket. He really does well by his people."

### Humble Beginnings

Grant is the second of two children to Willie, a crane operator who retired after 45 years, and Elsie, who worked in food service. They moved to Chicago in the



1950s during the Great Migration; both parents are still living.

Neither of Grant's parents obtained a formal education, but they made sure he and his sister Michelle Grant Ervin, a Washington, D.C.-based physician, understood that getting a good education was not optional.

"We were going to go to college, and they pushed for As" Grant says of his parents. "If we didn't get As, I had to pay for it. I learned early on that there's pain associated with your decisions. It's better to learn that when you're young than when you get older."

Grant was a child piano prodigy who started playing at 4. He played his first recital at 6, taught lessons from his teen years through to law school, and competed to the point that he suffered bleeding ulcers at 18 on his way to "wanting to be the next (black classical pianist) Andre Watts," he says.

After 53 years on the keys, he can still "play two hours cold," doing the occasional paid "gig."

"When I'm done playing, you can put me in a box," he says.

As a child, Grant knew he would grow to do one of three things for a living: become a classical pianist, a lawyer or a professor. He won a piano scholarship to DePaul University and intended to go before discovering the program's practical limitations.

"They told me I would be taking a series of classes that required me to practice eight to 10 hours a day, but my scholarship wasn't a full one, so I had to work," he says. "I made the decision that first day in the registrar's office to not major in music."

Grant decided instead to major in history, a discipline he says that helped him to have a photographic memory that benefits him to this day.

"When I'm preparing cases and briefs, I can see something and know it's there; I can visualize the case on the page," he says. "It got me through law school and still helps me tremendously in my career. I'm pretty sure it came from memorizing all those notes."

He ultimately decided that of the three potential careers, he'd become a lawyer — mainly because it still allowed him to help people and use all of his core strengths.

"Any trial lawyer worth their weight has to be a teacher," he says. "I figured I could positively affect the most people as a lawyer. Being a musician in the entertainment industry is fine, but the advancement of peoples' rights, to me, is on another level."

Grant discovered what type of law he wanted to practice as a college junior when he was a computer operator for a furniture company "back when computers took up a whole room." He went to DePaul's job placement and found an internship as a law clerk with a small law firm that has since merged into Hinshaw Culbertson.

"I knew I wanted to go into law, but I didn't know anything about it, so this internship was necessary," he says. "I had to take a \$2-per-hour pay cut, which was huge in 1978, but I spent three years there."

"I learned that I didn't want to practice criminal or divorce law. I liked business law, so I wanted to be a commercial litigator. From there, employment and contract work became a natural fit."

## The Last Intimidation

Grant attended the University of Maryland Law School — famous for being the third-oldest law school in the country behind Harvard and Yale, but infamous for having a segregation policy that deterred Thurgood Marshall, the first black U.S. Supreme Court

Justice, Grant determined that to practice the law he wanted to, he either had to go to a large firm or clerk for a judge. He chose the latter — clerking for the late Hon. Calvin C. Campbell of the Illinois Appellate Court.

Campbell was a black judge who graduated from University of Chicago Law School in 1951, three years before the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that declared unconstitutional state laws that established separate public schools for black and white students.

"He felt like he had to earn everything he got in life and that I had to earn it as well," Grant says of Campbell. "So he promptly put his foot up my rear and kept it there the entire year. I understand now what he was doing and why."

Despite the tough love, Campbell looked out for Grant, encouraging him to someday become a president of the Chicago Bar Association (Grant is currently the association's treasurer) and writing him recommendation letters.

"All this time I'm thinking he hates my guts, but his secretary called me and said that when he gave me a reference, he sounded like he was talking about his own son," Grant says.

## Things Haven't Changed

Following his clerkship, Grant was hired as an associate at the firm now known as Much Shelist P.C., a midsize firm where he was the first black attorney in the firm's history.

Hon. Michael Hyman of the Illinois Appellate Court was a partner at Much Shelist when Grant was hired. Hyman helped Grant hone his abilities, including his writing skills, and the men remain friends to this day.

"He's always been dedicated to his clients and making sure that their needs are met in a very professional manner," Hyman says of Grant. "He's a very skilled lawyer and is excellent at oral presentations."

One of the first things Grant learned doing corporate law at the firm was that a lawyer's value is directly based on their ability to generate business. That mindset carried him to the time he decided to hang his own shingle, Law Offices of Maurice Grant, in 1987. He's been a founder of various manifestations of his own practice, including 11 years of Grant Schumann, LLC before the opening of Grant Law.

"I knew that regardless of my situation — being in a firm or having my own house — I had to generate," he says. "I also realized I didn't want to continue working for and

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justice, from applying in the 1930s.

He picked Maryland in part because they had an orientation program for incoming minority students to get acclimated to the law school environment. Grant was one of 33 black lawyers in a class of 230, which he says was still more diverse than most of the law schools in Illinois when he graduated in 1984.

Grant's experience at the law school was the very last time he ever felt intimidated by his peers in the field.

"When I got there, it seemed like everyone was so far ahead of me," he says. "The list of institutions represented in my incoming class included Johns Hopkins and Harvard, and here I am, this kid from the inner city of Chicago. It felt like everyone was light years ahead of me, so I had to step my game up to stay with these people."

The drive from intimidation paid off: While in law school, Grant was assistant editor of the *Maryland Law Forum* and the articles editor of the *Maryland Journal of International Law and Trade* — a very rare feat to do both.

Upon graduating and returning to

going through the political process at other entities where no one looks like me when I can develop something on my own.”

Despite his successes and the increased number of minority attorneys and partners at firms throughout the country since he started practicing, Grant says progress hasn't been as profound as it should be. He says it's no coincidence that the partners and principals in most of the large firms nationwide are majority Caucasian.

“People need to understand that we still don't live in a colorblind society,” he says. “I've been practicing law for 32 years and not once have I walked into a room where there were five black lawyers.”

He does what he can in the name of his race and culture in his corner of Chicago on the second floor of 230 W. Monroe St. For example, everything in the office's main conference room “except the television and phone was created by a black person.”

Art pieces on the walls throughout the office are from the former curator of Chicago's DuSable Museum of African American History. A sculpture from the Shona people of Zimbabwe, whose art influenced the likes of Pablo Picasso, faces the conference table. All of the furniture throughout the office was picked out by Grant's wife, Fredericka.

“I believe in giving our people opportunities they might not get elsewhere,” he says. “Every immigrant group has had an opportunity to have their own enclaves in America, but we were the ones who were systematically separated and had our identities taken from us when we were brought over to America. People like to say that all of that that happened 200 years ago, but things haven't changed as much as some would think.”

Grant says that, despite his proven track record of career success, he still experiences professional racism and bigotry. He tells a story of a 1997 real estate transaction in Crystal Lake, Illinois, during which the buyers refused to sit in the same room as him.

“The broker called me up the next day and apologized to me, telling me they didn't want to be in the room with a black person,” he says. “I can go down the line with stories like this...it's all very real.”

Grant says he consciously navigates a corporate culture in which about 70 percent of Fortune 500 company board consists of Caucasian males — 90 percent if you factor in Caucasian women.

“Since I was young, (Black Americans) have comprised 13 percent of the population,” he says. “Latinos are ahead of us now, but corporate boards haven't changed. When I started working as a law

clerk in 1978, less than two percent of all lawyers at large law firms were Black; there have been very few gains since that time.

“What's worse is that there's a more sophisticated subterfuge going on. The more you educate a bias, the more a person can disguise it. Like ‘Make America Great Again.’ When was America not great? The answer is not given because it isn't true.”

Grant insists that pointing out America's many hypocrisies doesn't mean he doesn't love the country, only that he feels the need to address its many warts.

## Building a Superior Product

Just as he gave piano lessons as a teenager, Grant has never stopped teaching. He spent three years on the Chicago-Kent College of Law faculty as an adjunct professor, he is a current member of the Practicing Law Institute faculty, and he still teaches an annual trial practice course for the Chicago Bar Association.

Overseeing the firm doesn't keep Grant from maintaining a full caseload himself. He feels the same about practicing law as he does about playing the piano: He'll stop when he's pushing daisies.

“I've seen too many bad things happen with retired people who don't stay active,” he says. “What will I do...sit around and drive my wife up the wall? I want to always be learning, embracing challenges, and adapting to an ever-changing society. Living things grow, and a sure sign of death is to stop growing.”

Grant's primary goal these days is to continue building Grant Law into “a legacy that lives far longer than me,” he says. He also wants to ensure that the firm stays profitable when the next generation takes it over.

“I learned how to be profitable from many years on my own,” he says. “I do wish to grow, but I'd rather have six attorneys and be profitable instead of 10 or 15 attorneys and not be profitable.”

Ronald Austin, Jr. is likely the first in line to assume the mantle of Grant Law's leader when Grant can no longer practice. Austin started the firm with Grant in January 2015 and is the firm's only partner.

“He's really driven to build this firm,” Austin says of Grant. “He wants to make sure we're doing what we need to do not just because he wants good lawyers, but also to show that minority-owned law firms can do the type of work any other law firm can do, at or better than other firms. Doing our best and representing the best is his driving principle.” ■