

A More Inclusive Way

Maurice Grant makes it his business to boost diversity

BY HARRIS MEYER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY COREY HENGEN

MAURICE GRANT, A TALL, SLENDER MAN in a tailored Brioni suit, stands on stage, introducing the evening's honoree at a recent fundraising dinner for Chicago State University. Grant, board chairman of CSU's foundation, has not forgotten his roots. He tells attendees that the South Side school needs help because its students are mostly people of color, many of them struggling single parents.

Grant, 56, is co-founder and principal at the seven-lawyer firm Grant Schumann in Chicago. His parents, who didn't finish high school, came north from rural Mississippi in the early 1950s to seek a better life and job opportunities. Growing up on Chicago's Southeast Side, Grant saw friends die of drugs and gang warfare. He had his school lunch stolen from him at gunpoint when he was 12.

But his parents watched over Grant and his sister closely, dressed him in suits, "whipped" him when he was bad, took him to church, and paid for piano lessons from the time he was 4. He became an accomplished classical pianist, competing throughout his teen years. "Piano competitions are way harder than trying a case," he says. Grant won a music

scholarship to DePaul University; even so, he had to work nearly full time to support himself through college and law school.

"It was a very disciplined household, very stable, which most people don't have now," says Grant, sitting in his downtown office, surrounded by African and African-American sculptures and paintings. "I'm thankful."

Now Grant co-leads one of the handful of black-owned law firms in Chicago handling litigation and transactional matters for large corporations and government agencies. His clients include the likes of Wal-Mart, Integrys Energy Group, Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp., and the City of Chicago.

He hopes his firm will provide a lasting foundation to help achieve greater opportunities for minorities: "My objective is to grow something that will live beyond me, and practice law in a more inclusive way."

In the last few years, Grant and his firm have gained attention with a number of significant cases, including: a 2012 dismissal for the FDIC of a federal negligence and breach of fiduciary duty

suit; a favorable 2013 settlement for a meat-processing firm in a Fair Labor Standards Act class action involving nearly 100 workers in an overtime case; and the rewriting of contracts, including one with the gravediggers' union, in the wake of the bankruptcy of the historic Burr Oak Cemetery, which was hit by a scandal involving graves dug up to resell plots.

"He's very astute at understanding the issues and sensitivities," says former Circuit Judge Patricia Brown Holmes, court-appointed bankruptcy trustee for the cemetery. Holmes is a partner at Schiff Hardin and the incoming president of the Chicago Bar Association.

"He has this gregarious manner that wins people over," she adds, noting that her office was at an impasse in negotiations with the gravediggers before she hired Grant. "When Maurice came on, he told them, 'Hey, why don't we just resolve this? The last thing you want is to hear me nag you. My wife could tell you you've never seen a nag like me.' That's how he lightened the mood."

Grant, nicknamed Reese by his family, has a strong commitment to charitable, church and bar activities, such as the



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· CO-FOUNDER, GRANT SCHUMANN;
CHICAGO

· BUSINESS LITIGATION

· ILLINOIS SUPER LAWYERS:
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National Association of Minority & Women Owned Law Firms. He's also well known for rigorously mentoring young lawyers. His associates often repeat his mantra, "Don't get ready, be ready"—one of Grant's many favorite sayings, which his senior associate Maurice L. Gue has compiled into a growing notebook that he calls "Reese's Pieces."

"The level of attention he gives to each associate is something you rarely find," says Gue, who's been with Grant Schumann for seven years. "We can hold our own against any firm in the city because of his training."

Despite the numerous successes and the high praise from in-house attorneys who have hired him, Grant says he still has to be relentless to get new corporate business—even as corporate executives claim they strive for diversity. "Most of that is just rhetoric," he says.

He's frank in letting corporate officials know they need to do better. "I told a large bank that they are putting up a lot of branches on the South Side, but that only a small percentage of their contractors are minorities," he says. "I made a presentation to them that their revenues from those branches will dry up unless they invest back by contracting with minorities."

Mara S. Georges, Chicago's former city corporation counsel, laughs when recalling Grant's persistence. "He must have the best calendar system, because every few weeks he would call and very professionally say, 'We did this for you; how about more work?' He's very personable and it was always nice to hear from him." Georges, currently a partner in her own firm, now seeks Grant's advice on rainmaking.

She agrees with his assessment that minority- and women-owned firms are at a disadvantage. "A lot of in-house counsel understand that, when a case is unsuccessful, if they can say they used the biggest, most expensive firm, no one can throw darts at them," she explains.

Grant learned from his mother early on that he had to be very good at what he did. "My parents pushed me to be successful, and failure was not an option," he says. "I got my butt whipped when I brought home a low grade."

"I was a tough mom," confirms Eleese Grant, who lives with her husband, Willie,

not far from their son. "I wanted my son and daughter to be highly educated and become a doctor and a lawyer, and in the name of Jesus, that's what I got." (Grant's sister, Dr. Michelle Grant Ervin, is an adjunct professor of emergency medicine at Georgetown University.)

Deciding a career as a classical pianist wasn't in the cards—"I wasn't going to be the next André Watts, and I realized that at 18"—Grant attended the University of Maryland School of Law, where he was on the law review. He went on to clerk for Justice Calvin Campbell at the Illinois Appellate Court, serve as an adjunct professor at Illinois Institute of Technology Chicago-Kent College of Law, and become the first-ever black associate at Much Shelist. Then he decided to open a solo practice. While his original goal was to become a partner at a big firm, he saw that, as a black attorney, he would face barriers. "Most partners hire people who look and talk like them," he says.

Building a new firm was a difficult learning process, but he says, "I knew I needed my own clients and revenue stream. Billie Holiday had it right: 'God bless the child that's got his own.'"

In 2004, Grant decided to launch a firm with two other solo black attorneys, Anthony Schumann and Geraldine Holt. It took years of determined outreach to get cases from corporate and government clients. He started contacting Wal-Mart in 2006 and finally got his first two matters from the corporation in 2014: an ongoing Americans with Disabilities Act case and a racial discrimination claim. He's fiercely proud of snaring big companies as clients and serving them well. "Their business means everything to me," he says.

"There are not that many lawyers of color who've been able to grow a firm that relies on business clients," says First Appellate District Justice Michael B. Hyman, who mentored Grant at Much Shelist. "I respect him so much because he's been able to build something from the ground up."

Greta Weathersby, senior counsel at energy firm Integrys Energy Group, says Grant has been "a great advocate" for her company since 2005, getting many cases moved from the court system to the Illinois Commerce Commission. "He's

very tenacious," she says. "There may have been multiple motions, hearings and changes of judge, but he stuck with it and sometimes created novel arguments to have the case dismissed with prejudice."

Grant is particularly proud of the FDIC case. It was a 13-count federal claim that accused a trustee—a failed bank overseeing two land-trust agreements—of acting negligently and fraudulently and allowing the trustholder to be defrauded out of \$10 million; the FDIC was the receiver for the bank. Grant got the call, along with 19 boxes of documents, from the federal agency in November 2011; he was asked to replace another law firm. Working with his associates, Grant had until the end of February 2012 to prepare a motion for summary judgment while defending an opposing motion for summary judgment.

It was a big job in a tight time frame for a small firm, involving complex legal issues about who had authority to direct transfers of trust property and the nature of the trustee's fiduciary duties. On top of that, the client wanted the brief two weeks early. But in August 2012, Grant and his team won the case outright on summary judgment in a 27-page opinion.

Grant hates to lose—in law, tennis, piano competitions or anything else. "Losing is not my heritage," he says. So it pains him that in 2014 he lost his first trial in 16 years, representing a large municipal agency in a circuit court lawsuit brought by an auditing firm to recover fees. But his opponent says it was a "game-changer" when Grant took over from government staff attorneys, turning what looked like a blowout win for the auditing firm into a more difficult case.

"He was a tough adversary and developed arguments the other lawyers hadn't identified," says opposing attorney Charles Ritter Jr., senior partner at Duke Holzman Photiadis & Gresens in Buffalo, New York. "He's aggressive and came up with curveballs for me at the last minute. And he was fearless about moving forward into trial."

Holmes says Grant's legal creativity is related to his musicianship. "He's an artist, and he brings that artistic flair to the practice of law," she says. "Sometimes you have to pull him back. But he's looking

at it from a lot of different viewpoints that your typical lawyer might not see."

Grant is proud of running a diverse firm, which currently employs four African-American lawyers and three white lawyers, and includes two women. "If you start having more diverse firms, you'll have more diverse hiring," he says. "We have to start looking like the society in which we live."

His first associate hire was Gue, a young lawyer he lured away from a better-paying contract assignment with the promise of intensive training. Gue's workdays often start by going into Grant's office with a notebook and discussing the law, business and sometimes personal issues. "I wasn't used to practicing at his level, and it's caused me a lot of pain," Gue says with a rueful grin. "But you can go in any time to talk to him about anything."

Grant's perfectionism extends to the impeccable way he dresses and requires his colleagues to dress. "My mother

always said, 'Your package has to look good or no one will buy the product,'" he says. "I don't want anyone to discount me based on the way I look."

Associate Margaret Bogacki agrees that Grant is a tough but supportive taskmaster. "He is always there, saying, 'Let's think about the next step; here's why that won't work,'" she says. "I have to tell him to slow down. He's at step 10 and I'm still at two or three. He's not messing around, and that can take some getting used to. But it's good for a newbie like me."

After giving his associates detailed instructions and debriefings on hearings and trials, Grant often lightens the mood by taking them out to his favorite Italian café for sausage or chocolate chip cookies. "My one vice is chocolate," he says with a smile.

Fredericka, his wife of 19 years, runs an office furniture company. "Freddie is his secret weapon," Hyman says. "She has a

good business mind, and I'm sure every night she's telling him things he needs to know."

Walking around his office and pointing out the many art pieces he has collected, with titles like *Slave Vessel Chronicles* and *Nostalgic View of Black America*, Grant returns to the theme of widening legal opportunities for minorities. He aims to continue promoting a standard of excellence so that clients and other attorneys have confidence in the quality of representation provided by minority lawyers.

"The black bar is struggling, and black law school enrollment is dropping," he says. "That's really scary to me because it's through the law that we have made most of our advances. The firm is my legacy to expand diversity." [■](#)