

## "As Reported in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle"

# A Court Street Attorney Known for His Chutzpah and High Settlements

It's Not All About The Money; He Seeks Social Change, Too

By Elizabeth Stull  
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BROOKLYN — Court Street lawyer Sandy Rubenstein is not universally liked. He talks fast and juggles several matters at once. He can be abrupt, impatient, self-promoting — and often successful. In some lights, he is the spitting image of the publicity-hungry, ambulance-chasing lawyer, an image that the profession is trying hard to shake. But appearances may be deceiving.

If Rubenstein's personal style has not drawn rave reviews, his lawyering in high-profile civil rights and police abuse cases has.

He represented Abner Louima, victims of the Staten Island Ferry crash and the family of Ousmane Zongo. Earlier this summer, Rubenstein won a substantial settlement in the Zongo case.

In each of these cases, Rubenstein

said, "We got more than just money, we got change — and that's what was so significant to me."

One week last spring, two civil rights organizations separately recognized Rubenstein for his work. On a Wednesday, he received a Legal Leadership award from the NAACP's Brooklyn branch and the next day in Manhattan, he collected one of the National Action Network (NAN)'s N.Y. Keepers of the Dream awards.

Fellow NAACP honorees included Hon. William C. Thompson Sr., (ret.) Associate Justice of the Appellate Division, and his son, City Comptroller William Thompson Jr. Fellow NAN honorees included Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Sr., president of the Rainbow Push Coalition and "Godfather of Soul" James Brown. Rev. Al Sharpton presented the NAN awards. In the photos of these luminaries, Rubenstein stands out as the only white-skinned person in the group.

The hard-nosed Brooklyn litigator said he was honored to receive the awards and accepted them humbly.

Well he may have — but modesty is not one of Rubenstein's hallmarks. It was not humility that brought him through the city's public schools, from East New York up through the Ravenswood housing projects in Queens, to graduate from Brooklyn Law School and build a successful law practice.

### Driven to Do Better

By his senior year in high school, Rubenstein knew he wanted to be a lawyer. His family had few resources, however, so he had to do it on his own, he said.

His grandparents emigrated to Brooklyn from England, Russia and Poland. His parents grew up on the same block of Rockaway Parkway and fell in love as teenagers at Samuel J. Tilden High School. After graduation, his father ran a bookstore at Tilden High and went on to become a salesman at Sears & Roebuck. His mother worked, too, as a secretary. They eventually bought a little house in Rockland County, but Sandy spent most of his formative years in the projects.

"I think that I was driven to do better so that the quality of life would be better for my family," he said in an interview with the *Eagle*.

Rubenstein's father never finished college, and his mother dreamed that Sandy would realize his father's unfulfilled ambition to become a school-teacher.

He did. From Rockland Community College, he was recruited by the State University of New York at Oswego, where he finished his bachelor's degree in psychology.

Going at a frenetic pace, Rubenstein worked his way through three graduate school programs. Hearing him describe this period is a bit like standing at the edge of a freeway. Like speeding rush-hour traffic, his activities seem impossibly close and fast and likely to collide.



Recipients of the 2006 Legal Leadership award, presented by the NAACP's Brooklyn branch. Rubenstein is in the second row, third from the left.

Photos courtesy of Rubenstein & Rynecki

A special program at City College gave him his state teaching certification. He began his career teaching physical education to 5th graders at a public school in Harlem. When the school day ended at 3 p.m., he commuted to work at a law firm on Myrtle Avenue in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and then went on to night school at Brooklyn Law, Rubenstein said.

While earning a two-year MBA at Baruch College, he was a substitute teacher in Rockland County.

"I was always rather busy," Rubenstein admitted.

### A High-Profile Career

The storefront Bedford-Stuyvesant firm, Jacobs, Jacobs & Skolnick, accepted Rubenstein as a partner immediately upon his admission to the bar in 1972. It was a full-service law practice, handling criminal, commercial and personal injury cases.

After one partner died and the others left, Rubenstein moved the firm downtown to 16 Court St. in 1980s. It has expanded and moved three times in that building and now occupies a large portion of the 17th floor. Over the years, the office has grown from four attorneys to ten, with 30 to 35 employees.

Anyone entering the lobby is instantly surrounded by Rubenstein's legal achievements, represented not by plaques or awards, (displayed in his office), but in scores of framed newspaper clippings from prominent publications.

Among his many high-profile cases, Rubenstein is proudest of two in which he represented poor immigrants victimized by police misconduct.

The Abner Louima case made national headlines and shocked the nation in 1997. Louima, a Haitian immi-

grant, had a broomstick put into his rectum at a Brooklyn police precinct. Rubenstein represented Louima's civil lawsuit and recovered the largest award in history for police misconduct, with a settlement amount of \$8.75 million. The lawyer was also pleased that the Police Benevolent Association paid \$1 million of that amount — the first time any Police Benevolent Association had paid damages to a victim of police misconduct.

The Court Street attorney was most recently in the news for winning a \$3 million settlement for the family of Ousmane Zongo, an unarmed West African man who was shot and killed by an undercover police officer in a Chelsea mini-storage facility. The Staten Island officer was convicted of criminally negligent homicide. In sentencing him, a Manhattan criminal court judge criticized the police de-

partment's procedures.

The settlement matched a 2004 amount for the shooting of Amadou Diallo. Rubenstein said he was particularly pleased by reports that the city's police department would improve its policies and procedures.

"Not only did we get successful results for the family, but the police said they have tightened up their procedures in these cases," Rubenstein said.

He has also been in the tabloids this year for representing civil claims in the recent body-harvesting scandal.

Rubenstein acknowledged that his decision to take a case is partly based on its potential settlement value.

"If we feel that the case has merit and there is a significant damage aspect to it, we'll take the case," he said. "We also look at cases in which we believe we can make a difference by shining a light on the wrongdoing. We're hoping that by bringing these cases we can get change in the industry."

While the firm no longer handles commercial or criminal cases, its other practice areas sometimes provide financial support for the civil rights cases, which tend to be lengthy and time-intensive.

At 62, Rubenstein said he has no plans to slow down or move his practice. The Brooklyn kid lives in Manhattan now and races in a private, chauffeur-driven limousine. His daughter and grandsons live nearby and his younger sister, a schoolteacher, also lives in the area.

"I'm committed that this firm will stay in Brooklyn," Rubenstein told the *Eagle*. "While many lawyers move to the skyscrapers of Manhattan, I've been very pleased with my career in Brooklyn. I'm very happy being a Court Street lawyer."

### Defending Civil Justice

Still multitasking, he also hopes to find a publisher for his proposed book, "The Outrageous Rubenstein." The title comes from a *New York Post* article calling him outrageous in his representation of Rev. Al Sharpton.

In the book, Rubenstein intends to use his litigation successes to defend the American civil justice system: "[T]o show that what we do in our field, representing victims, it's not just about getting recoveries for victims — though I feel strongly about it — it's also to try to prevent that [injustice] from happening again."

"The system of justice that we have on the civil side is under attack on many fronts today," Rubenstein said. "The theme is that we should not allow these attacks to be successful. It is the best protection the individual has against wrongdoing by municipalities or corporate America."

Rubenstein dismissed the suggestion that he court publicity for his personal benefit, and ignored criticism of his sometimes abrupt, aggressive personality.

"I think the work we do and what we accomplish speaks for itself," he said. "Let the critics scoff. The accomplishment is real and that's what counts."



Brooklyn attorney Sanford Rubenstein joins hands with civil rights leaders at the National Action Network's NY Keepers of the Dream Awards, last spring.