

# NEW YORK Amsterdam News

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## Defending the defenseless

By CLOVER HOPE

Special to the AmNews

For years, attorney Sanford Rubenstein has taken on the cause of fighting for the general public and sparking large-scale social change starting in his Brooklyn-based firm. Though the prominent personal injury lawyer has worked alongside famed civil rights advocates Johnnie Cochran and Reverend Al Sharpton, he has also represented families stricken by tragedy.

In the face of legal troubles, Brooklynites and Caribbean residents in the city, who comprise a substantial amount of Rubenstein's clientele, turn to his legal team of Rubenstein & Rynecki for counsel. The 61-year-old Jewish lawyer has specialized in personal injury litigation for the last 33 years and seems to have a knack for defending individuals abused and mistreated by New York City law enforcement.

"These cases stand for more than just the representation of the clients in the case and getting them damages," said Rubenstein. "They also stand for trying to get change so that what happened to these victims never happens again."

Besides playing a crucial role in the famous Amadou Diallo trial—the first case in the nation in which a police union paid damages to a victim of police brutality—Rubenstein is representing the family of Ousmane Zongo in a \$150 million civil suit against the city of New York. Both Diallo and Zongo were unarmed Black men who were fatally shot by police officers.

The Zongo trial was declared

a mistrial last month after a deadlocked jury failed to reach a verdict for Bryan A. Conroy, the officer who killed Zongo, an African immigrant, in a Chelsea warehouse in May 2003. For Rubenstein, who said that Sharpton was the first person to call him a civil rights lawyer, one of the most gratifying aspects of representing individuals who experience such tragedies is realizing that one person can make a difference.

Rubenstein teamed up with the late Johnnie Cochran on behalf of Amadou Diallo, who was shot to death by Bronx cops in 1999. Cochran and Rubenstein helped Diallo's family win an \$8.75 million settlement. Rubenstein said of the many things he learned from Cochran, the most important was that "a client always comes first."

Abner Louima called on Rubenstein to represent him after police attacked Louima in a Brooklyn stationhouse in 1997. Rubenstein was instrumental in obtaining a \$7.125 million settlement from the city for Louima, the largest ever in a police brutality case.

Rubenstein made history in the Louima case by helping force the Police Benevolent Association to pay \$1.625 million in damages and to fund an independent council where police officers who witness brutality by other officers can make a report confidentially. "That in and of itself made a difference because police unions all over the country now look at that case and know that they could be held liable in similar situations," said Rubenstein.

Though he and his firm, Rubenstein & Rynecki, have been involved in high-profile cases like the Diallo case, the Zongo trial, and more recently, representing the victims of the fatal Staten Island Ferry crash of 2003, the firm initially made its mark defending lesser known individuals in the Haitian and Caribbean community. Rubenstein attributes his ease in such legal cases involving immigrants to his diverse upbringing.

The East New York native was raised in Brooklyn and Queens and has maintained his presence within the Haitian community since the early 1970s. It was then that Rubenstein began his practice in a Bedford Stuyvesant storefront, primarily handling immigration and other civil and criminal cases for Haitian immigrants.

"As a result of us starting there as the influx, particularly of Haitians, were coming to Brooklyn, we represented them in all sorts of matters," said Rubenstein. His family's move to the Ravenswood Housing Projects in Long Island City, Queens, in the third grade—he stayed until the first year of high school—exposed him to a multitude of other cultures, he said.

"Growing up in the projects, my friends and schoolmates were basically multicultural, so for me I was always very comfortable in a multicultural setting," said Rubenstein. He received his BA in psychology at the State University of Oswego, then went on a fellowship to City College Baruch School, where he received his MBA in marketing management. Rubenstein

attended Brooklyn Law School at night while teaching at a Harlem public school during the day.

When Rev. Sharpton filed a civil suit against the city, alleging that police failed to protect him from a 1991 attack during a protest, Rubenstein helped Sharpton reach a \$200,000 settlement with the city in 2003 over the stabbing incident. The decade-old lawsuit claimed that police promised to protect Sharpton, who called a march to protest sentences given to two men involved in a killing.

"[Sharpton] has given me the opportunity to have an insight that I don't think I had before I became his counsel," said Rubenstein. "Insight into the issues involving how our society has to be changed for the better so that everyone is treated equally," he said.

Sharpen said that Rubenstein has been a "consistent, effective and a constant presence" on issues that impact African Americans.

"He has been a jet-setter who decided to adopt causes that he did not do for fame or fortune," said Sharpton.



Attorney Sanford Rubenstein with Rev. Al Sharpton.