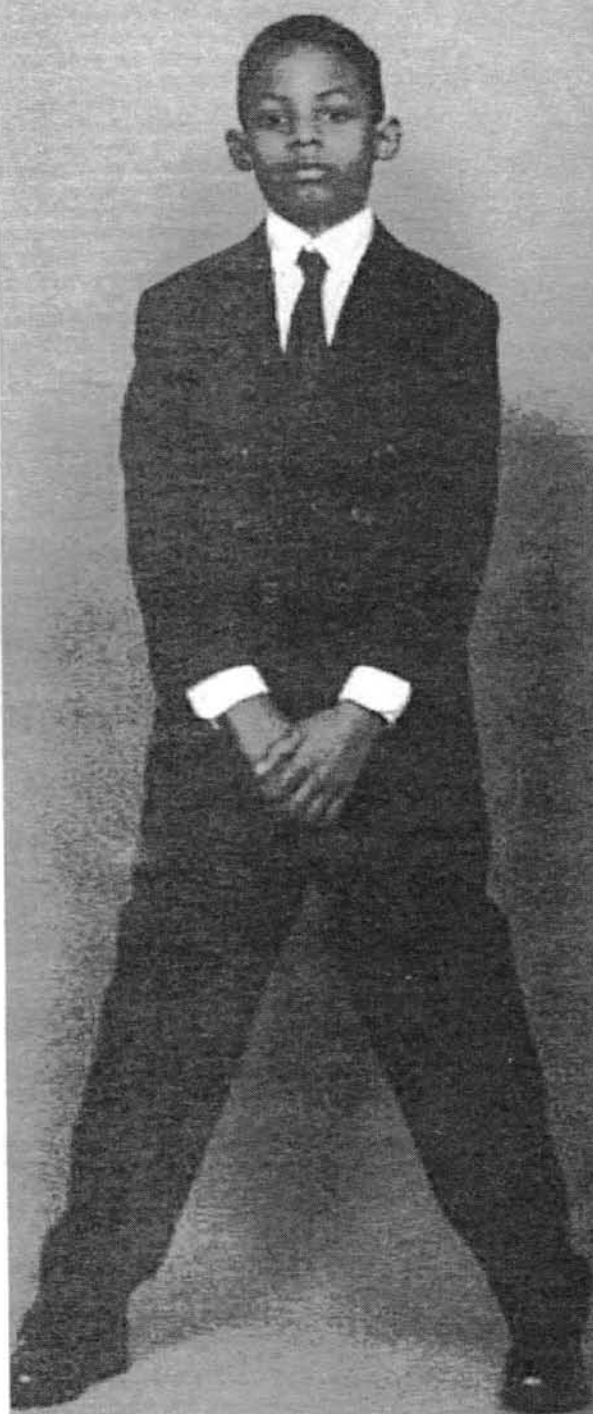



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NO KIDDING FOR JUSTICE

A PROFILE OF ATTORNEY SANFORD RUBENSTEIN

BY: NANCY RUHLING

He's fielding the media calls like a circus juggler, flip flop cell in one hand, a sleek black and grey cordless cradled in the other.

The New York Times wants a comment about the \$14-million damage cap the City of New York wants to impose on the victims of the Oct. 15, 2003 Staten Island Ferry crash that killed 10 and seriously injured dozens including four of his clients.

The New York Daily News and the New York Post also want his opinion. So do Bloomberg News and the Associated Press. And Channel 4, 5, and 7 all want interviews.

After making his comments, crisp and to the point, he schedules two TV tapings for the afternoon—he finally puts the phones down. "This is just a typical day in the life of an advocate for victims, which is what I consider myself to be," says Sanford Rubenstein, the high-profile civil rights lawyer who became a household name when he won a \$8.75 million settlement in 2001 from the City of New York and the police union "The Police Benevolent Association" for Abner Louima, the Haitian immigrant who was sodomized with a broomstick in 1997 by a police officer at Brooklyn's 70th Precinct stationhouse.

Just when he's finished fastening his gold-watch cufflinks and settling into his chair in the study of his floor to ceiling windowed Upper East Side penthouse, his cellphone beeps again. "Yes, of course, what time tomorrow", he says as he scribbles 9.a.m. on his yellow legal pad. "I'm looking forward to it".

"That", the raspy-voiced 59 year old lawyer says and smiles as he hangs up, "was my daughter. My first priority tomorrow is to babysit for my grandson, Myles who is 1 1/2 years old. I really believe that my work in civil rights doesn't just benefit those who have been treated badly, but it benefits all society, whether it's addressing racial profiling or police brutality, I want to make the world that my grandson inherits a better one for all."

Quite an admission from a guy who seems to be most happy not playing children's games but playing for real in front of the cameras. He is called upon regularly by major networks, CNN, Fox and MSNBC included, to comment on major cases in-the-news most recent—Kobe Bryant and Michael Jackson — that have national and international impact.

Name any prominent victims-rights and/or civil rights case in the City of New York, and Rubenstein who in 1998 was

named by the American Trial Lawyers Association's Melvin M. Belli Society as one of the top 25 trial lawyers in America, usually pops up. He's repped families of World Trade Center victims, young women who were attacked during the "wilding" in New York's Central Park during the Puerto Rican Day Parade in 2000, a young Long Island high school football player who was sexually attacked by older teammates, the family of Ousmane Zongo, an innocent man who was killed by police in a raid on a Chelsea warehouse, a consortium of restaurants that are suing for damages caused by the blackout of 2003, a New York Post photographer allegedly assaulted by a bodyguard for the rap artist 50 cent, as 50 cent looked on and a group of Haitian Community organizations protesting the racist videogame "Vice City".

Louima is not his most famous client—that title goes hands-down to Rev. Al Sharpton, whom he met through the Louima Case. "I had never met Sharpton", Rubenstein says. "Sharpton

was on the 'Larry King Live' show with the New York City Police commissioner and King was baiting Sharpton to go after the 'new white lawyer' in the Louima case, which was me, and Sharpton said, 'You mean Brother Rubenstein'. Sharpton knew of my involvement in the Haitian community and the Brooklyn Democratic organization, which had black leadership, so at the beginning of the march over the Brooklyn Bridge for 'Justice for Louima' when I saw him, I walked over to him and said, "Rev. Sharpton, I'd like to introduce myself, I'm Brother Rubenstein". And we linked arms and we spent about three hours talking while marching.

Soon, Rubenstein was not only Sharpton's personal lawyer but also his



friend. Since then, the two have traveled the world—Sudan to investigate the existence of modern day slavery, the Middle East on a whirlwind fact finding mission first breakfast with the Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres who at the time encouraged and then expedited a meeting with the Palestinian leader Yassar Arafat which became a working lunch. Ghana, to meet with Liberian rebel leaders and government officials to work for a cease fire and clear the way for humanitarian aid in that war torn country, the Dominican Republic after the tragic American Airlines plane crash and Vieques, Puerto Rico to observe the

“ ...I want to make the world that my grandson inherits a better one for all. ”

Some say that I went from the projects to the penthouse.

tearing down of the fence around the Navy base symbolizing the end of Navy bombing exercises there. Rubenstein also acted as Sharpton's envoy when he traveled to Burkina Faso in West Africa returning the body of slain victim Ousmane Zongo to his family for burial.

His penthouse office is filled with souvenirs from the Sharpton trips—including a pink flamingo from Miami, a poster promoting a speech by Sharpton at a college in New Hampshire with a photograph of Sharpton speaking with Rubenstein standing in the background, a miniature cow from Iowa, an alligator head from South Carolina, a toy trolley car from San Francisco, an African drum from Ghana, a walking stick from Sudan given to him by a village elder who said to him "Don't forget the suffering of my people".

Rubenstein had written a memo to Sharpton titled "Open the Door to 2004", which detailed ideas for starting up the presidential exploratory process. "He had expressed his interest to me under a huge tree at our camp site in Sudan", Rubenstein recalls. "He told me, if I have the fire in my belly to run for anything, it is to run for President of the United States."

Busy schedules kept them from getting together to discuss Rubenstein's ideas until Sharpton was going to Puerto Rico

to make a court appearance in conjunction with his arrest on trespassing charges during a demonstration against the U.S. Navy bombing exercises on the island of Vieques.

Although Sharpton and the three New York politicians who were arrested with him were told it was only a pro forma appearance, they were tried, convicted, sentenced, Sharpton to 90 days and jailed all in a matter of hours. "And then I was outside the courthouse addressing the world press", Rubenstein says. "When Sharpton was transferred to a federal detention center in Brooklyn, I was with him from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day for the balance of the 90 days because they would let him out of the cell and into the conference room to talk to his lawyer. And that's when I really got to know him and to see his inner strength and to understand how smart he was".

No one is more surprised than Rubenstein himself that the public spotlight is shining straight into his bespectacled eyes. "Some say that I went from the projects to the penthouse", he says.

The housing projects are in Ravenswood, Queens and he can see them from the panoramic views out his penthouse windows.

Born in East New York, Brooklyn, he lived in a tenement until he was in third

grade, when his family moved to the Ravenswood housing projects in Queens. When he was 14 his family moved again this time to a little house in Rockland County, where he spent the rest of his childhood and young adulthood.

He learned the value of hard work as a youngster. From the time he was 14, he held a variety of jobs. He delivered newspapers, he cut grass, he shoveled snow from driveways, he caddied at a local golf course, he sold pizzas door to door and worked in a mens clothing store. He began his higher education at Rockland Community College, earned a Bachelors of Arts degree in psychology from SUNY Oswego then an MBA in marketing from Baruch College. "I was the first male in my family to graduate from college" he says.

Unsure what profession to pursue, he remembered that the word "lawyer" was printed below his name in his high school yearbook in the careers category and his aspiration as a youth to become an attorney. At age 23, while teaching elementary school in Harlem he decided to study at night to earn a law degree from Brooklyn Law School. In his last year of law school he added to his schedule a part time job as a law clerk in a storefront law office in Brooklyn's Bedford Stuyvesant. When he completed law school he was offered a part-



nership at the storefront law firm, contingent upon his passing the bar exam. I passed on the first try and was as they say baptized by fire. On the same day as I was sworn into the Bar, I had to pick a jury and defend a man accused of a felony sale of heroin. The only one more surprised than I when my client was acquitted was the client, he says.

After representing defendants in a few criminal cases including a client accused of a high profile murder, Rubenstein decided to focus solely on civil litigation, specializing in personal injury. He continued practicing law at the storefront until he was held up at gunpoint twice within a few months. That spurred the law firm to move to its present location, 16 Court Street, downtown Brooklyn. The firm is now known as Rubenstein & Rynecki.

It was during his days in the storefront that he became involved with the Haitian community, many of whose members were coming to the storefront for legal help. At the same time, he got involved in politics and was elected to the Rockland County Legislature, where he was elected to seven terms and served as its majority leader and Vice Chairman. "I never lost an election in those 20 years", the Liberal Democrat says. "I very much enjoyed the challenge of public service." Soon

Rubenstein found himself one of those creating a movement to return democracy to Haiti. "I met Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the president of Haiti when he visited New York shortly after his election. I suggested that to rebuild the infrastructure of Haiti they should follow the model of Israel, Israel bonds, Israel National Fund, and he invited me to Haiti to discuss this with government officials. A few weeks later there was a coup and I worked hard organizing and leading demonstrations for a return of democracy to Haiti. When Aristide was returned to power I visited Haiti at his invitation and worked with government officials on economic revitalization."

Rubenstein says that whether the work is for the Government of Haiti or an average person, the outcome of his representation can have a global impact.

"Most importantly, what I do is more than just get the maximum in damages for victims" he says. "I also try to get change in society so that the tragedies that occur in which my clients are victims don't happen again".

In the Louima case, for instance, it was the first time in the history of our country that a police union paid damages—\$1.625 million—to a victim of police misconduct. But that wasn't all, as a result of the litigation, the Police

Benevolent Association agreed to fund an independent lawyer to whom police officers who witness brutality can go to report the incidents.

"We as trial lawyers are under attack, on the federal level, in Congress, there are attempts to cap damages, which is wrong", Rubenstein says. "We're under attack here in the City, the Mayor has proposed that we do away with juries in all cases involving the City, including City hospitals, public transportation and public housing. I believe it is best to have a jury decide what damages should be awarded with appropriate appellate review. It is the American way. It is the best protection citizens have in America from the abuses of big business and government bureaucracies".

Rubenstein checks the gold Bulgari on his wrist and calls for a car: it's 12:45 p.m., time to head to his Brooklyn Law office for the TV interviews. After a quick lunch of health food cereal topped with soy milk, raisins and a banana, he grabs his leather briefcase and climbs into the waiting Lincoln Town Car. While he's riding, he's working the phones, confirming his TV interviews and giving statements to local radio stations and the print media.

How does he find time for his all his court appearances as well as his media

I just hope by being in the arena that I can make life better for those less fortunate than I and also be a role model for young people.

responsibilities? Well, he has 10 lawyers and 40 paralegals to do a lot of his leg work, and they have a long way to walk: He also is very grateful to have a partner like Scott Rynecki, who has the responsibility for all the litigation. They occupy virtually an entire floor of office space. While they're working, Rubenstein is always thinking, coming up with brilliant legal strategies.

Speaking of waiting, the walls in his Brooklyn office waiting room are covered with framed newspaper clippings of his famous cases: Louima will get \$8.7M, \$25M FOR TOTS KILLED UNDER TRUCK, \$22M for a Motorcyclist Struck by Milk truck; 1M settlement for teen's broken leg; 7M for two burned in LIRR yard; Longshoreman wins \$1.5 Million Malpractice Award.

His private office also is filled - with photos. Floor to ceiling there are shots of Rubenstein together with the famous people he knows or has known. There is Sharpton and Louima, Bill and Hillary Clinton, New York Governors from Harriman to Pataki, Israel's Shimon Peres, Haiti's Aristide, Jessie Jackson, Coretta Scott King, Kwasi Mfume, Bishop Tutu, James Brown, Michael Jackson, Russell Simmons, Jay Z, Democratic Presidential candidates from Mondale to Gore. And stacks of awards, certifi-

cates and trophies line the windowsills, shining in the sun.

As counsel for Louima and other clients, Rubenstein has gotten to work with some of the greatest trial lawyers of our time, including Johnnie Cochran, who headed the O.J. Simpson defense dream team. "This has helped my growth as a lawyer", he says. "I came out of each case I worked on with Cochran a better lawyer, a smarter lawyer". Rubenstein enjoys along with representing victims in high profile cases working as a legal analyst on the major national news outlets "I enjoy presenting to the American public my analysis regarding the important high-profile cases of the day".

As part of his role of keeping the public informed, Rubenstein is writing an autobiography, tentatively titled "The Outrageous Rubenstein," which will detail some of his more noted cases and a defense of the Civil Justice System. "The title comes from an editorial in the New York Post that was critical of Rubenstein's representation of Sharpton in a commercial matter. It said "the only one with more chutzpa than Sharpton is his attorney, the outrageous Rubenstein". "It was meant as a pejorative, but I turned it into a positive and am using it as a working

title for the book I am writing".

He points to the statue of the Scales of Justice on his windowsill, presented to him by his daughter to commemorate his three decades of practicing law. His coffee-colored eyes brighten as he gazes out the window and he notes that he can also see the Statue of Liberty in the distance. There are no more fitting symbols, he says, than these two statues, for what he believes in and what he is doing and what he will continue to do.

"The number 60, my approaching birthday doesn't slow me down", Rubenstein says. "If anything it energizes me. I'm always busy. Through motivation, hard work and some luck, I've found myself in the arena. And it's the place I chose to be. I just hope by being in the arena that I can make life better for those less fortunate than I and also be a role model for young people. The American dream is alive and well. I believe my success and good fortune are an example of it. When a tragedy does occur in New York City my phone usually rings. I am ready to answer it and go to work.

With that he straightens his tie, puts on his jacket and gets ready to face the cameras.

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