

Mission accomplished

Youthful ambition led to influential law career

By Donna Halvorsen
Staff Writer

As a kid growing up in the inner city of Chicago, the only lawyers Jarvis Jones knew were on TV. He knew that's what he wanted to be.

But not just any lawyer. He wanted to be a corporate lawyer, because they had lavishly furnished offices and flew Learjets.

At 35, Jones is a corporate lawyer, minus the Learjet "and, take my word, my office is not plush," he says with a laugh.

In his job with the St. Paul Companies, Jones is doing what he wants to do, and he doesn't dwell on the jolts he experienced in getting there. But he remembers them, and he has spent several years trying to smoothen the road for law students and fledgling minority lawyers.

A graduate of William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul, Jones has been a mentor for students and head of committees that worked to make the school more receptive to minority students. He was a founder of a program that encouraged large companies to refer some of their legal work to minority lawyers. He worked with large law firms to help them retain the young minority lawyers they hired. He cochaired the Glass Ceiling Task Force, which found significant barriers for women and minorities entering the legal profession. He was president of the Minnesota Minority Lawyers Association.

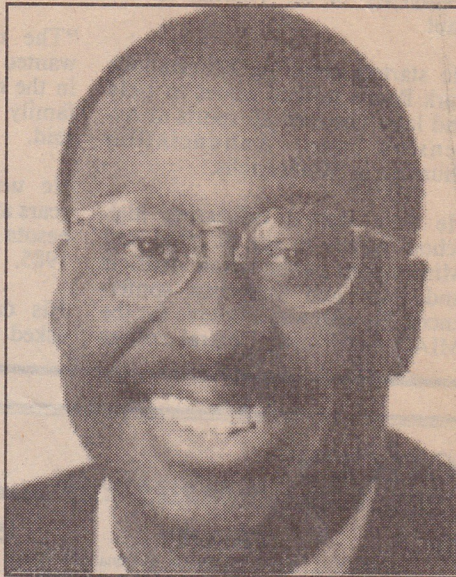
Now he is president of the Hennepin County Bar Association, which represents nearly half the lawyers in the state.

That he is the first black to head the association is significant to him.

"It shows a willingness for the bar to one, open its doors to people of color, and two, it shows the bar's recognition that it's important that we have a diverse legal system in order for justice, perceived justice, to take place," he said.

It's a one-year, volunteer position, and he's still business development officer with the St. Paul Companies' medical services division. But he says he can accomplish some things, including having the bar association "take a leadership position on certain issues that affect not just the legal community but the general populace."

The way to counter the negative image of lawyers is not "to say it's unfair, to write some letters and tell people how great we are," he said. "I think the approach is . . . to get out there and do good deeds, whether in the capacity of a lawyer or just out there at a



"I think [on countering the negative image of lawyers] the approach is . . . to get out there and do good deeds, whether in the capacity of a lawyer or just out there at a food shelter, helping someone."

**Jarvis Jones, president,
Hennepin County Bar
Association**

food shelter, helping someone."

Jones says he gets his work ethic from his father, who retired from the post office after more than 30 years but never really stopped working. "He owns several buildings and is always is doing something."

His mother, Lillian, worked more than 20 years at a dry-cleaning plant while raising five children. "They just expect all their children to do well," he said. "In that respect, I'm just one more of their children who did well."

But doing well didn't come automatically. Jones was turned down when he applied to St. Olaf College, which had been recommended by his pastor.

"St. Olaf took one look at my grades and everything else and said, 'You've got to be kidding,'" he said. "They were a little nicer, but that was basically the effect of what they

said."

It hit Jones then that he would have to apply himself. "I always knew that I wanted to be a lawyer but I didn't know, given my environment, what it took," he said.

He went to Waldorf College in Forest City, Iowa, with the goal of doing well enough to get into St. Olaf. He did just that, earning nearly straight As. Of about 60 minority students in a 500-member student body, he was the only one there for non-athletic reasons.

Even after two years at a tiny Lutheran college in the heart of Iowa, it came as something of a shock to Jones to arrive in Northfield, Minn., and find a campus largely populated by "blond, blue-eyed, upper-middle-class, white Norwegians."

His sanguine personality and determination to succeed kept him there. "I knew, leaving Chicago, that there just had to be a bigger world," he said. "So actually I welcomed the opportunity to experience a different environment."

Still, he asked himself at times, "Why am I here?" He remembers the time he overheard a good friend talk about "niggers."

"It made me wonder how true the relationships were that I had with other folks, too, not just him," he said. "That was a powerful memory and awakening."

But "despite the cultural shock and the racial perceptions, I had a very good experience. I got an excellent education . . . and it helped me understand a world different from the one I grew up in."

He graduated from St. Olaf in 1981 and from William Mitchell in 1985. Before joining the St. Paul Companies in 1991, he worked with United Healthcare Corp., then with the firm of Fetterly & Gordon before heading his own law firm.

As a successful lawyer, he knows that he is a role model for black children but asks himself, "Am I doing enough as a role model?"

"Charles Barkley is a role model, regardless of whether he wants to be one or not. He's a role model for thousands of kids just because he's a basketball star. But the harder question is whether he chooses to capitalize on his role as a model.

"All I can do is keep playing my song . . . I don't know how much of a difference it really makes in the scheme of things . . . but all you can do is keep playing your song."