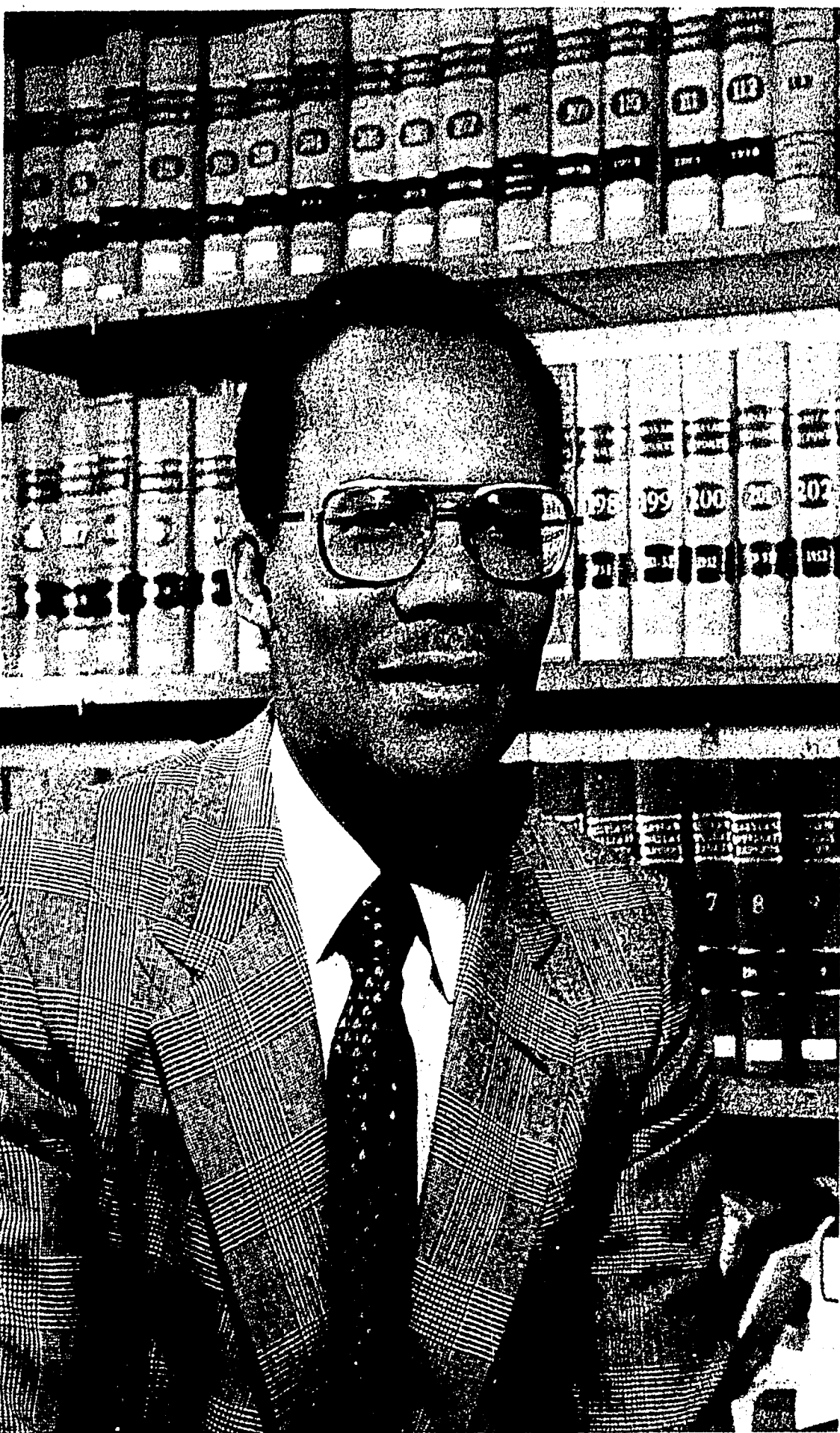


# Larry Gibson: rowing hard for racial justice

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Activist Larry Gibson says his main efforts these days are devoted to the law.

## Larry Gibson: rowing hard for racial justice

By Eric Siegel

**L**ARRY Gibson wants to set the record straight about the kinds of things that have taken up the lion's share of his time over the last few years.

They are not, he says, what he calls his "high-profile" activities.

Not his work as the campaign manager for Kurt Schmoke, who last year unseated two-term incumbent Bill Swisher in the race for Baltimore city state's attorney, which marked Mr. Gibson's formal re-entry into the local political arena after a nearly decade-long absence.

Not his efforts on behalf of PortVision, the minority partner of Cox Cable, which appears to have won a second chance at securing the city's cable franchise courtesy of the City Council, whose members were treated to a demonstration of his talents at aggressive advocacy.

And not, pray tell, his appearances as a regular panelist on WJZ-TV's "Square Off," the rat-a-tat-tat Saturday evening program on current events, which keep his perceptive, and often pithy, opinions before the public.

"Clearly," Mr. Gibson says, a brisk, no-nonsense tone in his voice, "law teaching and, for the last 3½ years, my work as a reporter to the Court of Appeals rules committee has occupied by far most of my time."

The 41-year-old professor at the University of Maryland School of Law admits the latter is something he doesn't "think the public is likely to get very excited about, although it really ought to." Certainly, he has no difficulty mustering enthusiasm for the scholarly business of what is officially known as the Court of Appeals Standing Committee on Rules of Practice and Procedure.

The Court of Appeals, he explains, adopts regulations that govern aspects of trial practice ranging from how to file a case to how to conduct a trial.

"Three and a half years ago, the Court of Appeals asked if I would work with the rules committee to bring Maryland's procedural law into the

twentieth century," he says, warning to the subject.

He reaches for a book with the thickness of a Bible on his desk, Exhibit A in his law school office-cum-classroom-cum-courtroom. "Now it's two volumes, the Maryland Rules of Procedure, two volumes like this." He puts the book on his desk and picks up a soft-cover manual the size of a small-town telephone directory, a tentative draft of the final report issued by the committee in May.

"We have cut the number of rules by one-fourth," he says proudly. "There were simply too many rules, there were alternative ways to do the exact same thing, there were ambiguities, there were inconsistencies."

Mr. Gibson leans his lithe, compact frame forward in his chair, fixing his inquisitor with a steely, this-is-the-way-it-is look.

"Teaching about procedure and revising rules of procedure have taken probably 70 to 80 percent of my time over the last three years," he states. "I want to be clear about that. I'm interested, as I think most of us are, in trying to make this a better world and to help realize the American dream. I think probably the principal impediment to achieving that is racial injustice. So a high priority in my life is eliminating racial injustice."

"That's a kind of global and overall concern. It's just a question of where one puts down his oar and goes to work. I choose the law school."

Those whom Mr. Gibson has toiled with and for say that wherever he puts down his oar, he rows hard.

Comes now Michael J. Kelly, dean of Maryland's School of Law, where Mr. Gibson has been teaching civil procedure, evidence and trial practice since 1974:

"He's a very good organizer, an absolutely superb teacher, very well-liked by his students. He is, I think, viewed as a kind of role model by our black students for the way he combines his professional responsibilities with a commitment to the community."

Comes now Baltimore city Circuit Court Judge

“It's just a question of where one puts down his oar.”

David Ross, former chairman of the Court of Appeals rules committee, which hired Mr. Gibson as its key staff person for its massive reorganization project:

"We're just extremely pleased with the work he did. Not only is he an outstanding scholar, he has excellent administrative skills. He not only reorganized our rules, he reorganized our office."

Comes now U.S. District Court Judge Joseph C. Howard, whose 1968 campaign for what was then known as the Supreme Bench Mr. Gibson managed and who remains a close friend:

"He's always been a bundle of energy — very, very competent and committed to getting things done and getting them done right."

Comes now city State's Attorney Schmoke, whose acquaintance with Mr. Gibson grew during a grass-roots campaign to the point where he now describes him as "like a brother":

"The guy's an activist. He's a tough fighter. He works hard. He's passionate about those things he gets involved with."

Even some of those who have opposed Mr. Gibson speak highly of him. Samuel J. Fonte, Jr., who managed Mr. Swisher's unsuccessful 1982 reelection campaign, is one.

"In the last campaign, I think we were all very happy that the race thing never became an ugly issue," Mr. Fonte says. "I think Larry, in particular, took pains to try to keep the focus of the campaign on the personalities of the candidate and the issues, not on race."

"I've gotten to like and respect Larry," he adds. "I enjoy the guy. I've told him I think it would be really great if we could work on something together."

Not all of those who have opposed Mr. Gibson speak quite so positively about him. Some, in fact, refuse to speak at all.

A call to the office of U.S. District Court Judge Norman Ramsey — who was president of the city school board in the mid-Seventies, when Mr. Gibson was defending school superintendent Roland Patterson against the successful attempt by the board to

ment by a secretary: "Judge Ramsey does not wish to make any comment."

And George L. Russell, Jr., the attorney for Caltec Cablevision, whose proposal to wire the city for cable television was approved by a special panel and the Board of Estimates but rejected by the City Council, partly because of Mr. Gibson's prodding, said when contacted at his office, "I don't want to comment on him."

Born in Washington in 1942 but raised in Baltimore, one of four children of a father who worked as a janitor and a mother who was a professional cook, Larry Gibson first displayed a passionate interest in social justice before he reached his teens. "I really got involved and read a lot about the execution of the Rosenbergs," he recalls of the celebrated incident that occurred in 1953. "After they were executed, every opportunity that presented itself throughout my academic career to present an argumentative paper, it was against the death penalty."

After graduating from City College in 1960, he enrolled in Howard University, where he majored in government and philosophy and served as president of the student government and chairman of the D.C. Students for Civil Rights.

It was there that he became involved in area sit-ins and also developed an appreciation for what he calls the "adversarial approach to finding truth" that inched him toward the study of law. "It just became clear to me the central role of the law in having an impact," he explains. "Lawyers seemed to be at the center of everything that was important."

After graduating from the Columbia University School of Law in 1967, he spent a year clerking for U.S. District Court Judge Frank Kaufman, then became involved in the 1968 Supreme Bench campaign of Judge Howard, who remembers picking Mr. Gibson to manage the successful effort out of a crowd of young campaign workers because he "felt he would be the kind of person I would need to organize the campaign."

Looking back on that effort, Mr. Gibson says, "It was the campaign wherein the black community's politics broke beyond the confinement of the 4th District. It was an important citywide breakthrough by a candidate



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—Kurt Schmoke

essentially selected by the black community, running and winning on a citywide basis."

That same year, at the age of 26, he became quite probably the city school board's youngest appointee in history. A newspaper story at the time described him as "a young man with very much a mind of his own" and newspaper headlines during the next several years attested to his independence: "Gibson Denounces Delay in School Construction"; "Gibson to Skip Closed School Board Meeting"; "Gibson Resigns Advisory Unit in Protest."

In 1970, Milton Allen, a senior partner in the private law firm Mr. Gibson had joined, decided to run for city state's attorney. Mr. Allen, part of a ticket that included William H. Murphy, Sr., for District Court judge, asked his young associate to run his ultimately successful campaign.

The following year, Mr. Gibson faced the son of the man he helped elect, William H. Murphy, Jr., in a

sticky jurisdictional dispute that wound up in federal court, with Mr. Gibson representing local Congress Of Racial Equality officials and Mr. Murphy representing the national CORE. At one point in the proceedings, Mr. Murphy filed a motion to forbid Mr. Gibson from representing the local officials because of an alleged conflict of interest. He later withdrew the motion and said he was "sorry to inconvenience Mr. Gibson"; the suit was eventually settled out of court.

Reminded of the confrontation, Mr. Gibson laughs heartily. "Just young aggressive lawyers," he says.

When asked about his current relationship with Mr. Murphy, who is challenging Mayor Schaefer in this year's Democratic primary, Mr. Gibson is less jovial. "I would prefer in this interview to not get involved with mayoral politics," Mr. Gibson answers after a long pause. "And I won't."

Mr. Gibson is more expansive in discussing the unsuccessful 1974

write-in campaign for Mr. Allen following his defeat by Mr. Swisher in the Democratic primary and his unsuccessful attempt to prevent the school board from firing Dr. Patterson. The latter came in 1975, a year after Mr. Gibson resigned the school board to pursue a career as a law professor.

An early and active supporter of Jimmy Carter, he spent the latter part of the Seventies commuting to Washington to work in the Carter Justice Department as an associate deputy attorney general and head of a special project to develop collaborative public and private efforts to combat white-collar crime.

If Mr. Gibson is enthusiastic about his work for the rules committee, he is downright fervent about his work at the law school. "One of the consequences of past discrimination is there aren't enough black lawyers," he says. "So I consider it a major priority in my life to increase the number of black lawyers. I think to a large extent a community's development depends upon its legal representation. I pay particular attention to how anything here has an impact on black students."

Indeed, Mr. Kelly, the law school dean, calls Mr. Gibson a "father-confessor to the black student organization"; 135, or 17 percent, of the school's 800 students are black. He also says Mr. Gibson, who is one of only two full-time black faculty members at the school, "played a very critical role" in helping to persuade Leroy Clark, former general counsel to the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, to join the faculty as a visiting professor this year.

"If Larry had to write his epitaph," says state's attorney Schmoke, "it would be as a good law professor."

It was to Mr. Gibson that Mr. Schmoke went early last year to discuss his desire to challenge Mr. Swisher for state's attorney — a prospect Mr. Gibson greeted with a strong dose of skepticism.

"He didn't say 'Don't do it,'" Mr. Schmoke recalls. "He said, 'Why don't you just talk to a lot of different people and get their reaction, people on the street. Make sure you talk to the guys in the barbershop.'"

"I didn't realize at that point how good a candidate Kurt would be," Mr. Gibson says. "He is the youngest per-

son I'm willing to call wise."

Mr. Schmoke in turn praises the wisdom Mr. Gibson displayed during the campaign. "He knew all the right questions to ask," he says. "He was a steadying influence. He's been down the road. When other people would get nervous over something, he'd say, 'This is going to happen.'"

Mr. Gibson displayed similar savvy — and a leave-no-stone-unturned thoroughness — in helping to convince City Council members to reject the \$125 million cable contract with Caltec, paving the way for possible approval of his client.

"I met with individual council members, I testified at the hearings, I supervised the preparation of written material that was supplied to council members," he says. "I was convinced that first of all as to black city councilmen, that if I could sit down and show them the difference."

Mr. Gibson says he agreed to lobby the council on behalf of PortVision because it "seemed to me that here was a situation where there really was a right and wrong. I'm fortunate now to the extent that I practice privately to pick and choose cases" on that basis.

He is equally selective about the candidates he works for. He admits he frequently has been asked to manage political campaigns but that he often has other work or "there was someone else I preferred to win." The overriding criterion in his decision: "whether a candidate also is impatient about racial injustice and wants to be about the business of ending it."

This summer, with some of the hottest local campaigns in years in progress, Mr. Gibson is spending a month on a family vacation in Greece with his wife, Diana, and son Steven, 8, something that comes as scant surprise to those who know him.

"As I watched him last summer," Mr. Schmoke says, "I was impressed with his ability to juggle all his activities and still be devoted to home."

"He's a man of many interests," he adds. "Not just politics and the law, but science, geography and sports."

"He has an enormous range of interests," Judge Howard agrees. "I wasn't surprised to find he was working with athletes along with Ron Shapiro [as a member of the board of directors of Mr. Shapiro's Personal Management Associates]."

"I know he's an ambitious young man," Judge Howard adds. "I thought maybe he'd make a thrust in the political world."

Mr. Gibson, however, denies any interest in putting himself before the voters. "I've never seriously considered running for office," he declares. "I like teaching, I like law students and I've run enough campaigns to know that the worst job in a campaign is that of the candidate."

Mr. Kelly, the law school dean, says, "If anything, he seems mellow now than when I first knew him seven or eight years ago. I think he's less restless. I don't think Larry lacks ambition but I think he's pleased with the way life's treating him right now."

Indeed, Mr. Gibson laughingly proclaims himself the "Twixt champion of the world" and says he is ready to "take on all challengers." He did all the plumbing in the renovated row house he has decorated with art and artifacts he has collected on travels to five continents.

"I used to leave the country every six months," he says. "Now, it's at least once a year. To understand where Baltimore is, where Maryland is, where the United States is, where the Western Hemisphere is, you've got to get a feel, I think, for the whole world."

"I think travel puts things back in perspective. It clears up my head. Things that seem so important seem unimportant. Things that I was taking for granted, like friendships, I realize are important."