

Dispensing Justice



with Compassion

By JENNIFER McNULTY

IN THE COMPTON

neighborhood of Los Angeles in the 1960s, Kelvin Filer's home was abuzz with conversations about civil rights and the struggle for racial equality.

"My parents were both civil rights activists, and as a child, I'd listen in when the adults were talking strategy," recalls Filer. "Their discussions always ended the same way, asking 'What do the lawyers say? Let's run this by the attorneys.' That's when I decided I wanted to be a lawyer." He was in the third grade.

Today, Filer is a highly regarded judge in the Compton district of Los Angeles Superior Court, dispensing justice with integrity and compassion. "No other profession ever crossed my mind—except basketball, and I knew that wasn't going to happen unless I grew," says the gregarious Filer, a diehard Lakers fan who stands 5 foot 10.

For 25 years, Filer has been making his mark in court rather than on the court, including arguing a landmark case before the California Supreme Court at the age of 27.

Filer earned a B.A. in politics from UCSC in 1977 and graduated from UC Berkeley's Boalt Hall School of Law. He was drawn to UCSC by the Narrative Evaluation System, the focus on liberal arts, and the absence of fraternities. He was one of only four African American students at Stevenson College his freshman year. The contrast could not have been greater for Filer, who came from Compton

High School, where most of the 750 students were black. He recalls feeling physically and culturally isolated at first.

"I remember when I first drove up the hill to High Street, and I asked myself, 'Where is the school? Oh, no, what am I getting myself into?'" But Filer loved UCSC. "Because there were only 150 or so black students out of 6,000, we were tight," he says.

Filer thrived in UCSC's student-centered living and learning environment. "For me, it wasn't so much about the professors as it was about learning from each other," says Filer. Nevertheless, an experience during the Stevenson College core course stands out in his memory.

"After the first assignment, the professor told me I had serious problems understanding Marxian concepts, and that really shook me up. No teacher had ever said anything like that to me before," he says. "I was determined to show him—and to show myself—that I could do it." Later in the quarter, Filer turned in a paper that the professor described as one of the best he'd ever read.

After law school, Filer spent two years working in the state Public Defender's Office in Los Angeles before opening a private practice in Compton. "I love

the practice of law," he says. "I love the challenge of representing the underdog, having them put their trust in you as you go up against the mighty people of the state of California. It's a lot of pressure, especially in death penalty cases."

During 13 years of private practice, Filer represented six clients charged with capital crimes. One is on death row, two were convicted of lesser crimes, and three had their cases dismissed.

Filer acknowledges that mistakes sometimes result in guilty individuals being released. "That's the irony, isn't it? But anyone doing criminal defense work will tell you that everybody has the right to a fair trial," says Filer. "That's what

makes ours the best legal system in the world."

Filer's landmark California Supreme Court case, *People v. Taylor*, established the right of the accused to wear street clothes in court, rather than "jail blues," which could prejudice jurors. The court's 8-0 decision reversed Alonzo Taylor's murder conviction. In the meantime, however, Taylor had been arrested and charged with another murder; he was convicted and remains incarcerated.

Filer moved to the bench in 1993 when he was appointed a commissioner of the Compton

Municipal Court. He misses some aspects of criminal litigation, particularly presenting closing arguments and cross-examining witnesses. "I love catching a witness in a lie. You can hear a pin drop," he says, clearly savoring the memory. "And I love the thrill of victory!"

But Filer relishes his role as a judge and enjoys being a role model. His daughter, Kree, appears destined for a career in law. His other daughter, Brynne, is a student at Sarah Lawrence College. "I was born, raised, and educated in Compton. This is where I'm from and where my family is from," says Filer, who visits schools every week to encourage students to work hard and follow their dreams. "I may not be able to change the world, but I may be able to change my little corner of it."

Although he moved to nearby Long Beach after being named to the Superior Court bench in 2002 by then-Governor Gray Davis (it's frowned upon for judges to live in the same community where they work), Filer is frustrated by media coverage of Compton, which focuses on crime, violence, and corruption. Success stories never get the media attention they warrant, says Filer, rattling off a list of illustrious Comptonites, from tennis stars Venus and Serena Williams to Michael Hamilton, an executive with AT&T, and Timothy Wright, a former aide to Bill Clinton.

Add one more name to that list: Kelvin Filer.

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Kelvin Filer
B.A. Politics
Stevenson '77