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Passionate About Justice

Famed civil rights attorney and his protégé want other attorneys to join in their fight.

By Shane Nelson

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Celebrated trial attorney Carl E. Douglas has no trouble singling out the legal work he's found most fulfilling over his more than 40-year career.

"The Creator put me on this earth to sue cops," Douglas said. "That is what is most meaningful for me."

In the 1980s, Douglas spent six years as a federal public defender in Los Angeles and then worked 12 years for Johnnie L. Cochran, Jr., trying an array of personal injury and criminal cases – including work on the O.J. Simpson murder trial. Douglas struck out on his own, though, in 1998, and soon after represented the lead plaintiff in a product liability matter that netted a nearly \$5 billion jury verdict – then the largest ever U.S. personal injury award.

Still, Douglas was quick to insist his long list of civil rights cases – often involving allegations of racism and excessive force against law enforcement officers – remain the matters closest to his heart.

"I will probably never die rich, but I will die with a smile on my face having done good things for good people," said the Douglas/Hicks Law APC founder. "Only living in South Los Angeles and being of color can you really appreciate the devastating impact that an unlawful police force can have on a community."

Douglas grew up on 109th Place and Denker Avenue on the west side of Washington High School in South LA, and he said he knew he wanted to be a lawyer by the time he was a middle school kid already fascinated by politics and how the law might be used to improve people's lives. Describing himself today as "a frustrated actor," who was too shy to try out for drama while an undergraduate at Northwestern University, Douglas said it took him a while to get into a courtroom, but he's been at home there ever since.



Photo credit goes here

From left, Jamon Hicks and Carl E. Douglas of Douglas / Hicks Law APC.

"Performing is where my spirit is. I can talk shit with a tie on," he said laughing. "Trying a case is the most fun you can have with a suit and tie on."

In 2014, Douglas partnered with fellow Cochran Firm alumni Jamon R. Hicks, who clerked for Douglas during law school in 2003 and then worked for him as an associate after completing his degree and passing the bar. In 2010, though, Hicks joined The Cochran Firm, where he worked for four years before reuniting with Douglas.

Douglas said he added Hicks' name to the door in 2014, in part, because "he is the only lawyer I will ever say was better at his age than I was." The two have since entered into a more equitable partnership, according to Douglas,

who said that wasn't something Cochran was ever willing to do with him.

"I'd have stayed with Johnnie Cochran until I died," Douglas said. "But he wasn't ready to share."

Determined not to make the same choice, Douglas said his partnership with Hicks has since led to far more economic stability for the firm, and today, the four-attorney shop handles not only civil rights, personal injury, wrongful death and criminal defense matters but has also taken on a substantial number of employment lawsuits.

"We specifically like retaliation cases, disability discrimination cases," Hicks said of the firm's employment caseload. "But we have a few pregnancy discrimination cases, and then,

obviously, the race and sexual harassment cases, as well.”

Hicks also grew up in South Los Angeles, where he said he experienced racial profiling at the hands of police as a kid and many of his friends suffered through far worse from law enforcement officers. The Loyola Law School graduate, who now teaches trial advocacy there, said working to improve relationships between the people of his community and police officers has always been a passion. And Hicks insisted the chance to partner with Douglas on civil rights cases – after having been, at least in part, inspired to pursue law while watching the O.J. Simpson trial on television as a kid – has been like a fantasy fulfilled.

“For the first time in the media I saw two Black attorneys as the lead in this epic, trial of the century type case,” Hicks said. “To be able to now work for Carl Douglas, after watching that trial and just being amazed at what he and Johnnie Cochran were doing, has been a dream come true.”

Douglas/Hicks Law is involved today in another high profile case, an excessive force claim involving Dijon Kizzee, a 29-year-old Black man fatally shot last August by Los Angeles County sheriff’s deputies in South LA. According to Douglas, the two sheriff’s deputies shot Kizzee 19 times.

The shooting prompted a series of protests outside the South Los Angeles sheriff’s station last year, and Douglas/Hicks Law filed a \$35 million claim on behalf of Kizzee’s family against Los Angeles County last month.

“Unless he had a machine gun firing an open clip, 19 shots is – by its very nature – excessive,” Douglas said, adding that he’s seen separate videos that captured images and sound of the Kizzee shooting. Cellphone footage of this nature has had a transformational impact on excessive force civil suits involving law enforcement in recent years, according to Douglas.

“There’s one video snippet that shows the shooting, and you can see dust flying up because the cops are firing when he’s down on the ground,” Douglas said of the Kizzee case. “It’s really terrible.”

Los Angeles employment attorney Maryann P. Gallagher, who’s known Douglas for 25 years, is working with him now on a sexual harassment and wrongful termination suit against Inglewood Mayor James Butts, filed on behalf of his ex-girlfriend and former executive assistant. Gallagher said Douglas asked her to join him as an equal partner in the matter, a request she said is rare in her experience.

“Guys do it with guys all the time, but it’s unusual for a guy to reach across to a woman and say, ‘Hey, come on in on this case. Be partners with me, equals,’” Gallagher said. “I think that shows a lot of strength and confidence.”

Gallagher also described Douglas as a lawyer who’s motivated by justice not dollars.

“Carl is not an attorney driven by monetary success,” Gallagher said. “He’s driven by something deeper, which is making sure he’s giving back to the community. ... And he represents people many attorneys would not represent, people with felony convictions and other really tough plaintiffs to represent. But he goes to court and brings to light the fact that these people deserve the same treatment anybody else gets – Black, white, convicted, not convicted.”

Long Beach defense attorney Jeffrey S. Behar, who is opposing Douglas in a case involving the 2018 fatal shooting of a 20-year-old Black man by a security guard at a Hollywood Walgreens, said Douglas is a longtime champion for civil rights and an excellent attorney.

“Carl is a fierce competitor, very outspoken, very passionate about advancing the interest of his clients, but he always does it in a professional manner,” Behar said. “He’s a true gentleman.”

Santa Monica plaintiffs’ attorney Geoffrey S. Wells, who has tried cases with Douglas,

said his warm personality is a powerful tool in front of a jury.

“At times, Carl sounds like he might be teaching a Sunday school class in church,” Wells said. “He has a terrific sense of humor and this ‘not too full of himself’ ability to just really connect with jurors.”

Douglas said in some of his more recent cases, however, he’s chosen to lean heavily on his younger partner’s impressive jury appeal.

“Jamon is so good that when we have cases now, even if it’s my case, I’ll allow him to do the closing argument,” Douglas said, “because he won’t come off as angry with the jury about these lying cops as I would.”

Douglas certainly didn’t stop there when praising his talented partner.

“Jamon Hicks is the nicest person I know, and I’m 65 years old,” Douglas insisted. “Jamon’s worked with me since law school and never once has he ever said a cross word to me, and I am not an easy mother fucker to work with. I love him like he’s my son.”

Hicks, who wasn’t shy about using the word “love” to describe his relationship with Douglas, said he’s extraordinarily grateful for the mentorship he’s received from his partner. But Hicks was also quick to note that while Douglas often earns acclaim for his years of success as a trial attorney, he doesn’t receive enough credit for helping a new generation of civil rights lawyers get their start.

“Carl genuinely cares about training what he says are warriors for the future,” Hicks said. “It was the same with Johnnie Cochran. Their desire was to create this litigation tree, where for decades and decades you just have new attorneys coming in who are passionate about their community and passionate about justice. ... We need more Black, brown, women attorneys. We need to be recognizing more of the transgender community. Everybody needs to be part of this fight together.” ■