BEARING WITNESS

RAYMOND BROWN BELIEVES NO ONE IS BEYOND REDEMPTION

by MICHAEL Y. PARK

photography by LUIGI CIUFFETELLI

Mansour Ahmed was caring for the communal herd in the valley when armed men riding horses and camels surrounded his village. First, they began shooting. Then they galloped through Girow, in the Darfur region of Sudan, with firebrands, quickly setting the grass houses ablaze, leaving Ahmed's family and lifelong friends out in the open. That made them easy targets for the guns.

As the shooting began to die down, the men, known as the janjaweed, began looting, taking whatever they could carry—money, animals, women—and destroying everything else, including the all-important village well.

By the time Ahmed returned to the village that day in 1998, six of his family members were dead. It was the second time the Arab militia had attacked them. In six years, after yet another assault, Girow would cease to exist.

"So the survivors went to the military base nearby, to tell the police and the military what happened," Ahmed, now 42, says. "Nobody cared."

One of an estimated 2.7 million turned into refugees by the conflict in Darfur, Ahmed was resettled by the United Nations in Portland, Maine. There he and other survivors argued that if there were ever to be peace, those responsible had to meet justice.

"Those people killed so many people, so many people have suffered, that people cannot accept it unless they hear and see that those criminals have been sentenced in court," Ahmed says. "That's peace."

But without a keen legal mind to navigate the intricacies of international treaties, negotiate with the egos of foreign dignitaries, and help evoke the indignation of the international community, Darfurians like him would not receive it.

Enter Raymond M. Brown.

BROWN, A LITIGATOR and partner in the litigation department of Greenbaum, Rowe, Smith & Davis, was born in Jersey City in 1946, when segregation was still pervasive, the unfairness of which wasn't lost on him. His grandfather worked as a mill hand, one step above an indentured servant, in Jacksonville, Fla., and had once just escaped a lynching. His grandmother, a literate black woman, had fought for the rights of the workers at her husband's mill, insisting they be paid in cash and not in scrip. Brown's father, Raymond A. Brown, was one of the first black judge advocate generals in the U.S. military, one of the first black lawyers in New Jersey, and, as president of the Jersey City branch of the NAACP, intensely involved in the civil rights movement.

"He's just like his father," says 90-year-old Eva Russell, a community activist who helped raise the younger Brown when his mother passed away during his childhood. "You don't live with a man like Raymond Brown Sr. and not do what he does."

When the family moved from Jersey City's Booker T. Washington housing projects to the then-white neighborhood of Greenville, they became one of the city's first black families to cross the unofficial "Jim Crow" line.

"We sort of ingested with our mother's milk that you needed to be part of the movement," Brown says. "It was taken for granted that we would be part of that struggle.

"Of course, when I was younger, I wanted to be a ballplayer—until the Giants defected to the West Coast and I gave up on sports," he adds, laughing.

For Brown, doing international work is a continuation of his father's civil rights work. "In a sense, the old battles are fought anew on new turf," Brown says.

When he was old enough, Brown joined his father in civil rights protests. "I remember the first picket line we worked on in '61," he says. "There were seven of us on the picket line and 50 cops. Because in Jersey City, you didn't protest or challenge authority."

He went to Columbia University and majored in history and government. He emerged as a leader of the students who fought against the school administration's involvement in the Vietnam War and against construction of a university gymnasium in a public park, which the neighboring black community considered a slap in the face. The protests would be immortalized as the 1968 Columbia student revolt.

"You heard of a guy named Mark Rudd?" asks Mark Rudd, who was the leader of the local chapter of Students for a Democratic Society and who is often given credit for masterminding the protests. "The real Mark Rudd is Ray Brown Jr. I'm just a pale impostor."

Brown used his skills as a negotiator to manage a coalition of student groups interested in advocating on behalf of black Harlem.

"He was a master of communication," Rudd says.

Though Brown and others were arrested, the protests succeeded: Columbia University never built its gym. The group even convinced the university to sever its connection with a weapons research think tank. Brown began thinking seriously about a law degree.

"Spending time in the Tombs will certainly open your eyes to the legal realities," he says. "And it seemed a logical way to advance my interest in civil and human rights while maintaining my independence."

He graduated from Columbia in 1969 and enrolled in law school at the University of California, Berkeley. There, he became interested in international law.

When he graduated in 1974, he returned to Jersey City and partnered with his father, taking on corruption and criminal cases. Among their big ones was the "Dr. X" trial in 1978, in which a surgeon was accused of killing five patients with a muscle paralyzer. The defendant hired the Browns, who won an acquittal.

"[The younger Brown's] strengths were piercing intellect and the ability to convey complex issues to a jury," says Henry Furst, who worked with the father-and-son team on the case and became their partner two years later. "More important, he knew how to act in Hudson; he knew how to act in Monmouth. He knew how to assess the forum."

Brown attracted attention well beyond New Jersey's borders. In 1995, when Americans were transfixed by the O.J. Simpson murder trial, Brown was a regular legal analyst for Court TV. He so impressed the network bigwigs that they offered him his own show.

"Ray is one of the smartest people I've ever met," says Tim Sullivan, senior vice president of daytime programming at what is now truTV. "Ray was always a voice for not rushing to judgment. He helped us understand the way the criminal justice system is perceived by the black population."

As an anchor, Brown renewed his interest in international law, traveling to The Hague to cover a Bosnian war crimes trial. He also began teaching law classes, including summer stints as an adjunct professor in American University's international law program in Cairo.

When Court TV changed its focus and Brown lost his show, he returned to the practice of law and became an adjunct professor at Seton Hall University School of Law. He also co-teaches a course with his wife at Seton Hall University's School of Diplomacy and International Relations.

"Many lawyers who don't have much of a global curiosity outside of this country find it very difficult to learn about all the interconnecting conflicts that have gone on for thousands of years and that might contribute to contemporary conflicts," says Brown's trial lawyer wife, Wanda Akin. "But Raymond is so knowledgeable about all of these and other things that it makes it very easy."

In 2003 and 2004, a friend recommended that Brown and Akin be appointed lead defense counsel at the Special Court for Sierra Leone, which was trying the second-ranking member of the Revolutionary United Front, who was accused of crimes against humanity. The RUF is alleged to have embarked on programs of exceptional cruelty and lawlessness, including forcing young boys to become child soldiers and young girls to become "bush wives" for the troops, systematically amputating the limbs of civilians so they couldn't vote or mine diamonds for the government, and taking hundreds of U.N. peacekeepers hostage.

"The idea of defense is the idea of redemption," Brown says. "No one of us is beyond redemption."

Brown and Akin coordinated the defense teams. The job consumed the better part of that year and they expect a court decision soon.

"We lost a lot of money doing it, each had bouts with malaria, so we came back," Brown says, laughing.

In 2006, Brown joined Greenbaum, Rowe, Smith & Davis, where he chairs the white-collar crime practice group. He brought with him a new mission in social justice centered on helping people from Darfur. He had met several Darfurians while at the School of Diplomacy. He subsequently met with more in New York, Washington, Connecticut, Oregon, Maine, East Africa and Europe. And he met Ahmed, who would serve as an intermediary between Brown and the community.

"These are people who have watched their mothers and children ripped limb by limb by the janjaweed," Brown says. "I've never been asked for a dime by any of them. They say they just want justice, and you can't make that up."

That year Brown won his first major victory for the Darfurians in the glacially paced war crimes court, getting 11 of his clients recognized as victims by the International Criminal Court—the only such Darfurians so far. For Brown, it's a continuation of his father's civil rights work, but with different names and in exotic languages.

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