

Mann of the Hour

Treasure of Detroit honoree Larry Mann reshapes his world

BY TARYN HARTMAN
Legal News

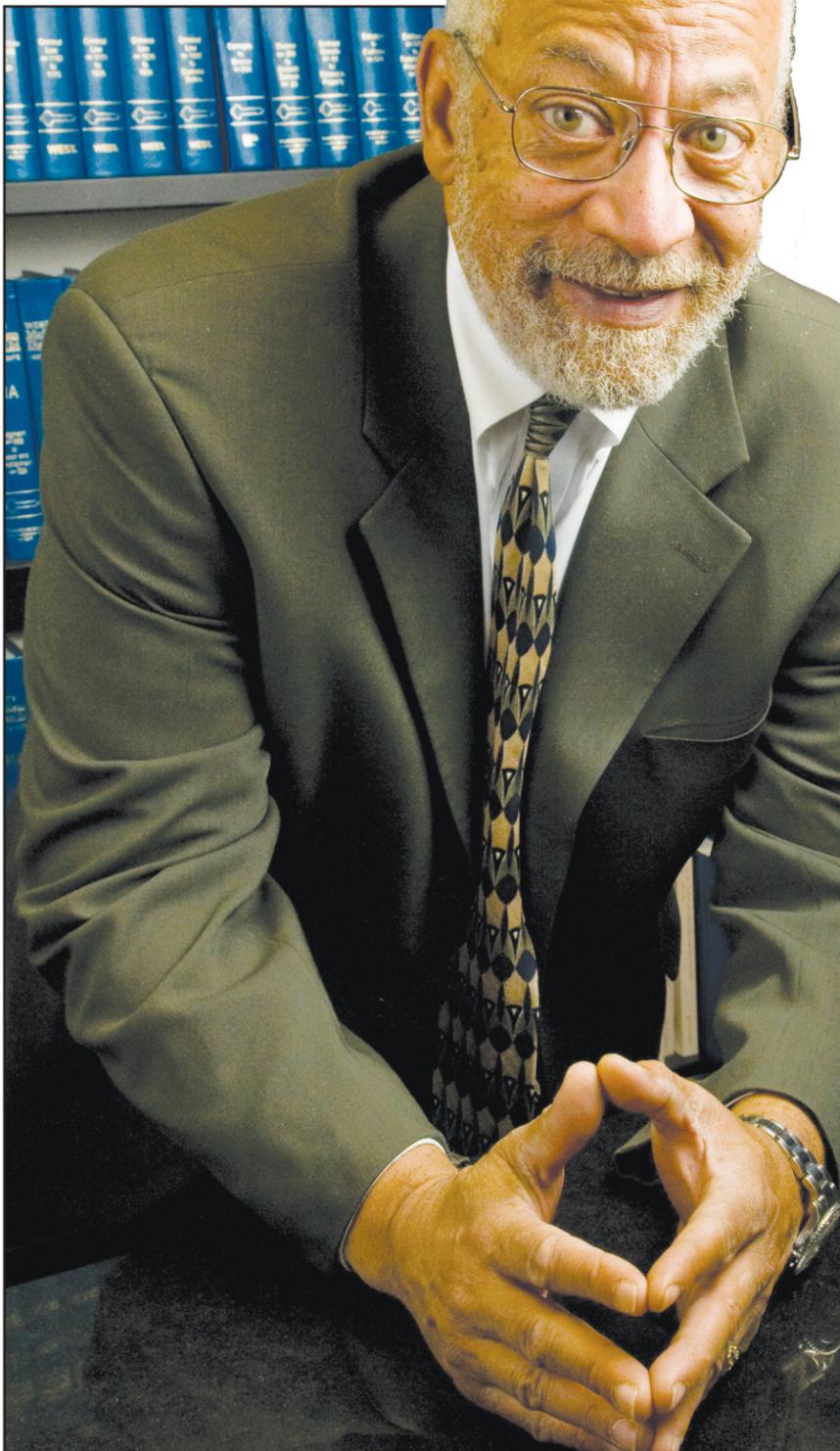
From his sixth-floor office at Bowman and Brooke in Troy, Larry Mann, the lawyer appears far removed from Larry Mann, the activist. But as he begins to recall his time as a student at the University of Michigan — the years that saw him occupy the former administration building following the assassination of Martin Luther King — it's clear that those experiences continue to impact how Mann has embraced and promoted diversity throughout his storied legal career.

In what he says was the first time a student group took over the building, Mann was pictured in the campus newspaper standing on the front steps with then-University President Robben Fleming, whom the current administration building is now named for. Campus legend says the 1968 structure was designed to be riot-proof with a construction that prohibits ladders from resting against its outer walls.

"Our takeover drives the installation of the fortress," Mann says some four decades later in a voice that evokes the tenors of actors Morgan Freeman and James Earl Jones.

"I imagine that no one who knew me at that time would imagine that I'd be sitting here in this chair doing what I'm doing," he says of his classmates and contemporaries. "Representing corporate America and Toyota and Honda and Nissan, capitalist enterprises."

The experienced litigator who's spent much of his career on automotive cases and as co-managing partner of Bowman and Brooke's local office will be honored Saturday night as one of three Treasure of Detroit honorees selected by Wayne State's Law School, where Mann is an alum and former professor. Also being honored at the gala are retired Wayne law professor and former dean Joan Mahoney and civil rights leader Dean Robb, both Wayne Law alums.



Photos by Robert Chase

Bowman and Brooke attorney Larry Mann will be honored Saturday night as one of three Treasure of Detroit honorees selected by Wayne State Law School, where he is an alum and former professor. Also being recognized are former dean Joan Mahoney and civil rights leader Dean Robb.



Larry Mann graduated from Wayne State Law School in 1980 and returned as professor in 1984, earning tenure in 1991. Mann says attending law school changed his life. "Wayne empowered and enabled me," he says.

A native Detroiter who grew up a few blocks from his alma mater Central High School and close to six blocks from the center of the 1967 riots, Mann's commitment to civil rights work was driven by his desire "to be and have the impact that [former Detroit City Councilman] Ken Cockrel had in terms of trying to shape and re-shape democratic America and open doors, level the playing field," he says. It has also shaped his focus on diversity throughout his career as a litigator and law professor.

He was on campus when the riots broke out, where the overwhelming feelings were "a lot of fear and angst for everyone, not just African Americans. It was all of us," Mann recalls. "It was a very interesting time to be alive, and a very hard time, because you are filled with fear yourself as an African American."

Such fear, angst and eventual anger came from Mann's transition from a high school of 2,500 black students to a dorm that was nearly 100 percent white. From "images on TV of black and white kids getting slaughtered in the South, together." From attending a meeting at Mary Markley, a campus dorm, where a young woman had returned from the Freedom Rides in a cast because "they'd beaten the crap out of her."

"Ambivalence is another good word," Mann says. "You don't quite know how to deal with all that, and one of the things that happens is you get very angry, which I was. Exceedingly angry."

Mann was part of the first class of what were then called "Opportunity Awards Scholars" — "the first time the University ever attempted to really build in a critical mass of African American students that were not athletes," he says. The accompanying culture shock further complicated an already tense era.

"What's interesting is that although it was a shock, Ann Arbor was the vehicle through which I learned to deal with people as people," Mann says. It's a skill that's become indispensable in his work as an attorney.

"Larry is a person's person," says Bowman and Brooke co-managing partner Tom Branigan, who founded the firm's Detroit office with Mann in 1991 while Mann was between stints as a full-time, tenured law professor at Wayne State.

Branigan recalled taking Mann to a trial around 2005 in Charleston, South Carolina, where within the first few days Mann was on a first-name basis with all of the court officials and employees.

"He is one of the most friendly persons anyone will ever meet," Branigan continues. "Larry has a personality that will light up any room."

The legal field has provided Mann with an outlet to effect the kinds of change he'd always envisioned.

"Law is an avenue that allows one to influence things," Mann says. He started at Wayne at age 30, calling it "one of the top decisions I ever made," despite his initial trepidation about cutting it academically, fitting in socially, and most importantly, liking it.

Everything ended up working out. Mann calls the hard work he put into arguments and analysis alongside a diverse group of people he wouldn't have met otherwise nothing short of transformative.

"Wayne changed my life," Mann says. "Of course, I changed it because it's my effort, but Wayne was an enabling and empowering experience."

He returned to the law school as a professor in 1984, earning tenure in 1991 and leaving shortly thereafter to found Bowman and Brooke's Detroit office, then located in the Fisher Building. He was back in the classroom full-time from early 1998 through 2003, a move inspired in part by overhearing his young daughter tell a friend that her father lived at the airport because of his grueling trial travel schedule. He stopped teaching in December 2008.

As a professor, Mann returned many of the favors Wayne initially granted him as a student.

"Larry was always one of the best of us," says Wayne Law Professor Jon Weinberg, who first met Mann when Weinberg interviewed for a job on the faculty in 1988. He describes his former colleague as "wise, perceptive, humane, and un-ego involved, which is unusual in our line of work" and praised Mann's work on the law school's faculty self-governance and his clear vision on school's goals and purpose.

"I think it's a tremendous loss for us that he's no longer on the faculty, but the case with Larry is that he's just good at too many things," Weinberg says.

Given his background, Mann thought he'd be a natural fit as a civil rights lawyer, but thanks to work during law school at plaintiff's firm Goodman, Eden, Millender and Bedrosian; a clerkship with Eastern District of Michigan Judge Horace Gilmore; and two years at Dykema, "doors opened and people gave me an opportunity to walk inside and take a look, and I did, and I got opportunities to try lawsuits and learn."

And he learned that it wasn't just civil rights law that allowed him to have an important impact on the diversity that mattered so much to him.

"My generation thought it would re-shape the entire world. And we didn't, of course; we influenced it," Mann says. He found that being an employer gave him the ability to create jobs and opportunities for others, shaping the world on a slightly smaller, but no less valuable, scale.

Under his direction, the Detroit office has won a host of diversity awards and Mann has been able to impact employment and training at the other five office nationwide, which has helped garner national recognition for Bowman and Brooke.

"Every successful organization needs a Larry Mann," Branigan says.

"Diversity is empowering," Mann says of what represent some of the greatest accomplishments of his legal career. "Just to see the team work across all kinds of what to some people might be barriers, is beautiful. It's our present and the promise of tomorrow."

Such a promise is alive at Wayne, Mann says, and he is certain of the school's importance to the Detroit community he calls home.

"Wayne empowered and enabled me, and I just hope that no matter what happens going forward, as perilous economically as these times are, that Wayne in general and particularly Wayne's law school remain an access point to freedom and empowerment and equality," Mann says. "It's a vital institution."

And of the school's graduates, many of them Mann's former students who have returned to practice in their local home communities, he says, "They're ambassadors for the Constitution, and those things that hold us together, and those things that we hopefully don't want to sacrifice for expedience."

As a Treasure of Detroit honoree, Mann joins a host of other local legal luminaries who have been honored in the past, including U.S. District Judge Avern Cohn and Judge Damon Keith of the U.S. Court of Appeals, whom Mann said he reveres.

"I don't know that I really fit, but that's okay. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose," he says with a raspy belly laugh.