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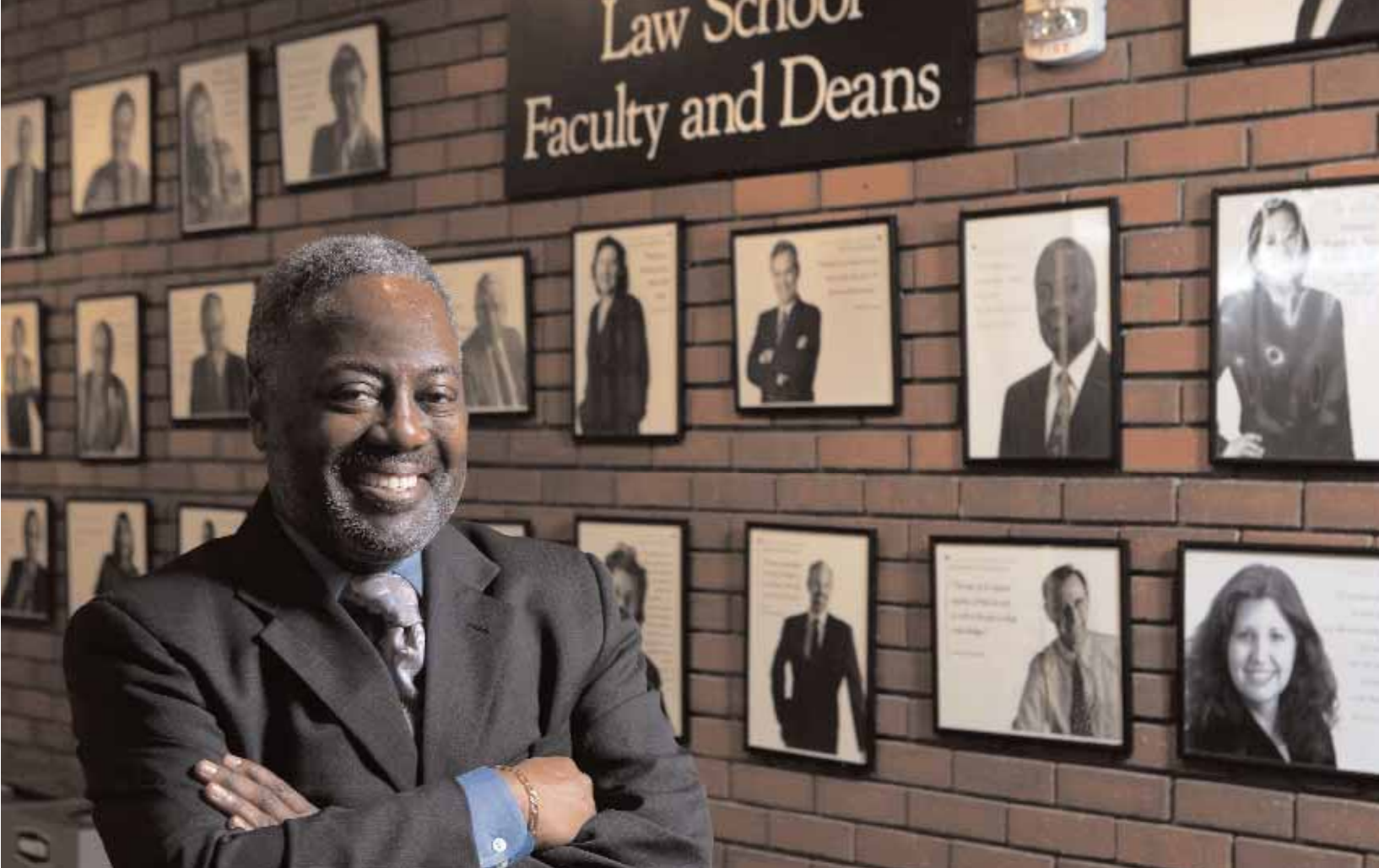
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Golden Gate University School of Law— Dean Frederic White

Leslie A. Gordon

The Bay Area is home to several world-class law schools that produce terrific talent valuable to BASF and the legal community. In the last issue of *San Francisco Attorney*, we profiled Nell Jessup Newton, dean of UC Hastings College of the Law. We will continue our profiles of the deans of some of these law schools, featuring the great work they're doing to train new attorneys.

Frederic White is a longtime trailblazer. In the '60s, he became the first person in his family to graduate from a four-year university. Three decades later, when he agreed in 2004 to head Golden Gate University's School of Law, White became the first African American dean of an American Bar Association (ABA)-accredited law school in California.

Raised in Cleveland, White was a standout in high school, excelling in athletics, on the school newspaper, and in class. While in college at Columbia University, he became a political activist. New York City, White recalls, "was not particularly welcoming. It was a pretty cold place. I don't regret [going to school there], but I didn't have a great time." Approaching graduation, White debated whether to enter journalism or to pursue a career in the law, eventually choosing law school at a time when Ivy League schools were just starting to recruit black students. "I didn't want to be a starving writer," White explains about his career choice.

After graduation from Columbia's School of Law in 1973, he practiced municipal finance law at Cleveland's Squire, Sanders & Dempsey. "It was fun," he recalls. "There was a lot of traveling, and it was satisfying to see what the money got—like building a school. But my grandma didn't understand what a bond attorney was. She was concerned I'd have to carry a gun!"



Preceding page and above, Dean White at the Golden Gate University School of Law

A few years later, White left law practice to teach property law, landlord-tenant law, and wills and trusts at Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, where later he rose to associate dean. While working at Cleveland-Marshall, White served as grand jury foreman and donated significant time to mentoring law students, some of whom are now judges. "People don't realize the power adults have over young people," he says. "Kids are listening; they're not slackers."

White spent twenty-five years at Cleveland-Marshall and had no plans to leave. But Golden Gate's School of Law was searching for a new dean and heavily courted White. "I liked the mission, the enthusiasm," he explains about his attraction to Golden Gate's law school, which was founded in 1901 as a YMCA night school to provide a legal education to working people. "This school is private, but it acts like public school. And we have a great staff."

Now in his third year as dean, White's agenda includes expanding the school's Honors Lawyering Program in which students work during the summer with real clients in a student-run law firm. "One of the drawbacks of law study is we stay theoretical way too long, unlike medical school," he explains. "I want students to get involved in the life of lawyering." White also plans to continue to beef up Golden Gate's niche in environmental law and is working toward "better recruiting of African Ameri-

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a priority,
nothing's
a priority."*

cans and other minorities.” He’s also hoping to teach his own class on wills. “If everything’s a priority, nothing’s a priority,” he says of his goals.

The best part of serving as Golden Gate’s dean is that “the students are really hungry,” White says. “And I’m able to recruit new faculty. People will tell you the worst part of being dean is asking for money, but it’s not. It’s one of the best parts. I love meeting alums. I visit them in other states, and they ask me, ‘What took you so long?’ They tell me, ‘Golden Gate gave me a chance, and I’ll help by giving back.’” He has met alumni as far away as Thailand and Paris while visiting the law school’s international summer programs.

White’s fundraising experience is one of the reasons the school recruited him, according to retired Judge Lee Baxter, a Golden Gate alumna and a member of the law school’s dean search committee. White “was known to be quite effective” in raising money, she says.

Baxter has gotten to know White by chairing the Dean’s Advisory Council. “He’s very enthusiastic,” she says of his style. “He’s personable and approachable and very easy to work with.” One of White’s biggest challenges, according to Baxter, is to improve the school’s bar passage rate. Although White has been at the school only a few years, Baxter believes “he’s moving in the right direction in that regard.”



Dean White in his offices at Golden Gate University School of Law

“With compassion, thoughtfulness, dignity, and civility, say what you mean and mean what you say.”

In his nonworking hours, White spends time in his downtown San Francisco home with his wife, a retired customer service representative whom he met when he was twelve. They married thirty years later, after they had both been married before. Between them, they have three sons, four grandsons, and one granddaughter, whom White affectionately refers to as Gladys Knight. “The rest are pips,” he quips.

Other than the “jolt of the cost of living,” the career move to the Bay Area has been “a pretty good experience,” he says. White and his wife “still act like tourists,” spending time at Fisherman’s Wharf and at local museums. They don’t have a



Dean White and Mrs. White enjoying a stroll and sourdough bread near their downtown home along the Embarcadero



Dean White Photos by Jim Block

car, so they often travel by ferry to Sausalito and Tiburon or walk to the Embarcadero for lunch.

White’s approach to being dean—and to life—is summed up, he says, in a quotation under his photo on the second floor of the law school: With compassion, thoughtfulness, dignity, and civility, say what you mean and mean what you say.

“That’s my philosophy,” White explains. “Fifteen years ago, I wouldn’t have said the first stuff. But I’ve mellowed. In the position that I’m in, people are looking and you must reflect something they want to be.”