





Designing History

Strategist of landmark political campaigns from as far away as Liberia and as close as Baltimore City, Professor Larry Gibson takes images from his own storied past and Maryland's history to paint a rich future.

BY LAURA WEXLER

At the January 2006 inauguration of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the new president of Liberia, Larry S. Gibson occupied a prestigious ringside seat. He watched Laura Bush, Condoleezza Rice, and various VIPs promenade down the red carpet. He listened as Johnson Sirleaf, the first female elected head of state in Africa, gave a speech he'd helped her write. He toasted the occasion at a gala celebration on the lawn of the executive mansion in Monrovia. "All inaugurations are historic," says Gibson. "But this one was particularly so."

Yet just a few months later, as he pages through the binder he created to document his role as lead campaign consultant to Johnson Sirleaf, Gibson is far less interested in discussing the inauguration than he is in showing his images of... ponchos. "The campaign was during the rainy season," he says. "So we ordered 20,000 bright green ponchos that said, 'Rain will not stop Ellen,' on the back."

After finishing with the ponchos, he talks lovingly about...banners. "I got 600 of them," he says, pointing to a photograph of a banner hanging securely from an apartment building in Monrovia.

Then it's off to stickers and plastic bags and calendars and brochures before Gibson arrives at the *piece de resistance*—or, rather, the poster de resistance—that features the campaign's trademark image: Johnson Sirleaf in both 2005 and 1986, standing in the same classic leader's pose, her hand outstretched toward the people. The 1986 shot

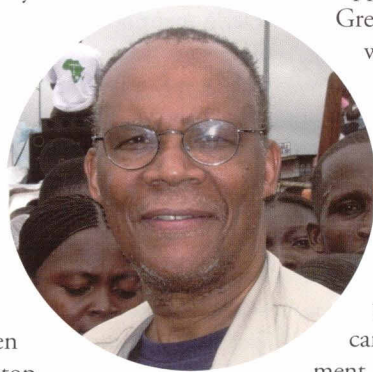
was taken upon her release from prison for making a speech critical of Liberia's then-military dictator.

"When I saw that photo of her being released from prison, I started planning the poster in my mind," says Gibson. Indeed, the binder contains his crude pencil sketches of the poster design, which he scrawled on the flight back from his two-week trip to Liberia in June 2005.

The aspiring president looked to Gibson for help back in December of 2004 on the advice of her supporter and chief fundraiser, Harry Greaves, a longtime friend of Gibson's whom he'd met on his first trip to Liberia in 1972.

A respected member of the Maryland law faculty for more than three decades, Gibson, in his free time outside the law school, has pursued efforts as a political strategist for many of those years, managing twenty different campaigns at varying levels of government, both locally and internationally.

And Larry Gibson is also a self-confessed "frustrated graphic artist," who gets positively giddy about campaign materials: logos, images, photographs—anything concrete, symbolic, tactile. When he served as the state chairman for the Clinton/Gore presidential campaign in 1992, he insisted that the Maryland campaign have its own logo—one he conceived and raised the funds to support—a fact he reports almost as proudly as he does President Clinton's love for Larry's mother's potato salad (secret ingredient: olives). When he became legal counsel to the newly formed World



Umpires Association in 1999, he also designed the association's brand, collaborating, as he has for the past twenty years, with graphic artist Joseph Yoor at the Baltimore firm New World Graphics.

"I've always been heavy on campaign materials, ever since my first campaign in 1968," says the sixty-four-year-old Gibson. The year 1968—when Gibson ran Joe Howard's campaign for circuit court judge, the first citywide election won by an African American—is apt, because Gibson says Johnson Sirleaf's 2005 campaign in Liberia was run similar to a seventies-era statewide campaign in Maryland. "It was a heavy field campaign—low on paid media, high on quality materials, high on visibility. I think materials are the main thing. They campaign for you all day long," he says. "During the Liberia campaign, we had a helicopter drop campaign stickers on villages inaccessible by road. The whole idea was, they were to come down like rain. We rained down about a half-million to 750,000 stickers on 200 or so villages."

He relates this anecdote with such delight that you can almost see him standing in the middle of those villages, aswirl in campaign stickers, a witness to history in the making.

The loose-leaf binder documenting Gibson's work in Liberia is just one of many in his life. In his office at the law school, an entire wall of shelves houses a collection of blue binders, each containing documents relating to one of Maryland's African-American lawyers from 1887 to 1977.

"From 1885 until the 1970s, we averaged only two new black attorneys per year," he says. "There was this gross under-representation of blacks in the bar."

Gibson began his archive as a way of both documenting and correcting that fact; it's a fueled by the same thirst for materials that characterizes his political life, a thirst he seeks to pass on to his students.

Brandon Thornton, a 2002 UMLaw graduate who assisted Gibson with the black lawyers project, says Gibson made Baltimore history previously unknown to him come alive. "In terms of the research, he'd lived through it," says Thornton, who now serves as an assistant public defender in Baltimore. "He knew all these people and had all these stories in his head."

On a recent Monday afternoon, second-year law student Sara Deriu is



moving through her presentation on George W. F. McMechen, an African-American lawyer in early to mid-century Baltimore, during Gibson's seminar, "Race and the Law: The Maryland Experience." (He co-teaches the class with state archivist Ed Papenfuse.) Throughout her talk on her research-in-progress, Gibson frequently jumps in, urging the students to seek out housing deeds, court records, photographs, and maps—to eat, drink, and breathe in the history directly.

At other times, he removes his glasses, nods his head, and closes his eyes. Far from dozing, he's making connections, narrowing the gap between past and present. When Deriu mentions that McMechen was the first black person appointed to the Baltimore city school board in 1944, Gibson allows that he believes he himself was the seventh. When she mentions McMechen's participation in various African-American civic lodges, he speaks with authority about the differences between them. When she shows a slide of the house where McMechen moved in 1911 (thus prompting the city council to pass an ordinance making it illegal for blacks or whites to move onto racially segregated blocks), Gibson recalls attending junior high in that same neighborhood.

And when he asks, at the end of Deriu's presentation, what conclusions about race and the law can be drawn from McMechen's life, and no one ventures an answer, he provides one. "As an African-American lawyer, you were deemed *ipso facto* a leader simply by *being* a lawyer," he says. "Almost no one was free to *just* practice law."

True of McMechen, and true of

Gibson. At City College High School, he served as the first African-American class vice president; as an undergraduate at Howard University, he was elected student body president. After law school at Columbia University, he was admitted to the Maryland bar in 1967, becoming, by his current count, the 133rd black lawyer in Maryland. Five years later, in 1972, he became the first African-American law professor at the University of Virginia, before he and his wife, Diana, returned to Baltimore in 1974. He's been on faculty at UMLaw ever since. "I've been teaching here so long I'm now teaching the children of students I taught," he says.

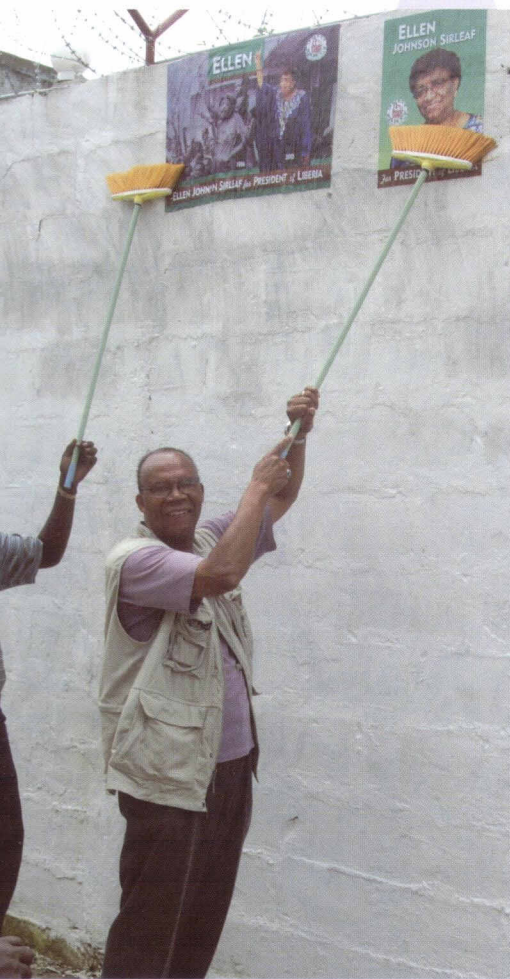
Gibson also teaches civil procedure and evidence—and a class in election law, which received quite a bit of attention during the *Bush v. Gore* Supreme Court case in 2002. "I started my election law class at a time before many law schools offered such classes," says Gibson. "We had reporters, TV people in here."

Beyond his teaching, Gibson has served the law school through his efforts to recruit African-American students and honor African-American alumni.

"He has been an important role model, a mentor, and a historian for many, many African-American students who've become members of the legal community," says associate dean and professor Richard Boldt. "He's one of the highest visibility members of our faculty and has been a missionary for spreading the message of the law school outside of the university community."

Recently, Gibson played a key role in persuading the state legislature to fund the construction of the law school's new

Gibson pitched in on all aspects of the historic campaign, from strategy sessions with the candidate to putting up posters. "I put one up on that balcony myself because they kept sagging when other people put them up."



building—which, according to Gibson, Senate president Thomas V. "Mike" Miller half-jokingly called the "Larry Gibson Memorial Building."

Beyond UMLaw, Gibson is best known in Baltimore for his role as campaign manager for Kurt Schmoke's three mayoral campaigns. Schmoke, now dean of the Howard University School of Law, describes Gibson as "tenacious, thorough, and inspiring." In most modern political campaigns, Schmoke says, there is a division of labor in which the chief strategist delegates ground level activities—but Gibson works differently. "He studies everything about the campaign, from poll numbers to the type of glue you use to put up posters. He's chief cook and bottle washer," says Schmoke. "He'll go out on the hottest day and put a bumper sticker

on a car or a yard sign on a lawn."

It was Schmoke who introduced Gibson to Malagasy politician Marc Ravalomanana in June 2001, when he was considering running for president of Madagascar. After making a two-week trip to the country with Schmoke to assess the situation, Gibson became the principal campaign consultant and advisor for Ravalomanana's successful campaign. Five years later, the victory still pleases him, but he's almost as delighted that a campaign logo he created for the country's legislative elections in 2002 is now on the 10,000 ariary note. It says, in Malagasy, "Build Roads for Madagascar," and shows a man with a shovel, a woman and a child walking down a road together towards a bright sun.

Despite his success in Madagascar, Gibson initially turned down the invitation to participate in the Johnson Sirleaf campaign when Greaves asked him in December 2004—since his trips to Liberia in the 1970s, he had been continually disappointed by the country's violence and instability. Eventually, however, he agreed to conduct a two-week assessment similar to the one he and Schmoke did in Madagascar. "If I were in the States, I could have done a poll. Instead, I traveled around—not as a political partisan, but as Professor Gibson from the States who was interested in Liberian politics," says Gibson. "I asked people several questions...but what she [Johnson Sirleaf] really needed to know was whether, in this patriarchal, traditional country, a woman could get elected. I concluded that she could win."

Gibson wrote a memo that summarized his conclusions and made specific recommendations for structuring and strategizing the campaign. That was supposed to be the end of his involvement.

Instead, Greaves convinced Gibson to create the campaign materials. So last July, he and his wife, Diana, flew to Hangzhou, China, where he supervised the creation and shipping of his beloved ponchos, stickers, posters, brochures, and banners. Just before classes at the law school started last fall, Gibson returned to Liberia once again to train workers, structure the staff, and launch the campaign.

In November, Johnson Sirleaf, a Harvard-educated former finance minister of Liberia, won the election in a closely contested race.

Greaves, now CEO of the state-owned Liberia Petroleum Refining Company, says Gibson's most significant contribution was devising the strategy. "In a traditionally male-dominated society, he convinced us that the female vote would be the decisive factor in those elections and that we should make that a central feature of our campaign," he says.

Gibson's work in Madagascar and Liberia allowed him to add two more countries to the list of some sixty that he's visited, for both work and pleasure—he's an avid scuba diver as well as a committed hobby photographer. Though he knows he'll help Ravalomanana when he runs for re-election this fall, he has no plans for international political campaigns. But he says he is, "interested in Africa having orderly transitions of government in which no one gets killed."

But Gibson has half dozen other things cooking—besides his normal course load at the law school. He is Of Counsel at the prestigious Baltimore law firm Shapiro Sher Guinot and Shandler. He spearheaded the effort to rename BWI airport the Thurgood Marshall Baltimore Washington International Airport, and create and install an exhibit there honoring the pioneering Supreme Court justice. And he's working on a groundbreaking book about Marshall's early, vital years as a lawyer in Baltimore.

As he says, "There always seems to be an issue."

Laura Wexler is the author of Fire in a Canebrake: The Last Mass Lynching in America (Scribner, 2003) and a senior editor at Style magazine.

