

# Burlew: Courage keeps lawyer standing tall

CONTINUED FROM PAGE E1

the right. Scarring on the center of his retinas has made him legally blind.

"I can't see your face clearly, from here," he says from behind his office desk, maybe six feet away.

He can't see the faces in a jury box clearly, either. Can't indulge in a once-favorite pastime, reading historical novels. (Instead he listens to books on tape.) Can't drive, which means everything must be planned in advance, be it a trip to a grocery store or visit to a client across town. For work-related transportation, he relies on buses or taxis or members of his staff.

He still has peripheral vision. He can put on glasses, hold a page a few inches from his face, and read out of the corner of his eyes. But the glasses serve only to magnify, not to bring the blur into focus.

"I always had great vision," he says. "I know exactly what I'm not seeing."

After his eyes went bad, Burlew began handling fewer civil cases — which often require extensive reading of records, receipts and the like — to concentrate on criminal law, where there's more emphasis on interviewing.

## Unimpaired attitude

In a perfect world, justice is blind and John Burlew can see. But we don't live in a perfect world. So Burlew makes do.

"He never gives a suggestion that he's impaired in any way," says Robert H. Gorman, presiding judge of the First District Court of Appeals and a former municipal and common pleas judge. "And it hasn't impaired his attitude."

Indeed, "It would have been easy to say, 'I'll just not work as hard or not try as hard or not reach as high,'" Kathleen Burlew, a University of Cincinnati psychology professor, says of her husband of 23 years. His perseverance, she believes, is his greatest triumph.

Others agree.

"The thing that astounds me most about John is his courage," says Timothy A. Smith, a criminal defense lawyer and friend of Burlew's for nearly 20 years. "I didn't even know he was going blind. He kept it secret from most people. One day he walked up to me and said, 'If I pass you and don't say hi, it's because I'm losing my eyesight.'"

wing. That's why today he makes it a point to hire minority law students as clerks, and to lend support to young African-American lawyers.

One of them, Kenneth Lawson, in May successfully defended former Reds star Deion Sanders on charges related to an altercation with a Cincinnati police officer at Riverfront Stadium.

"When I turned around in court, John was there," Lawson says. "If I needed something, any advice, he was there for me."

Burlew was there for Lawson two years ago, too, when Leslie Isaiah Gaines was about to become a municipal court judge. Rather than let Gaines close his 22-year-old private practice, Burlew recommended that he turn it over to Lawson.

Several years before that, Burlew penned an article for the *Cincinnati Herald* in which he called Gaines — a competitor for clients — "the best lawyer in Southwest Ohio." Gaines cried when he read it, and says Burlew is a "big man" for realizing "no one is a threat to his own success."

## Respect his top priority

Burlew is a big man physically, too, at 6-foot-1, 210 pounds. A stranger half expects a big, booming voice to match, but it's mellow and breathy.

On a late afternoon in his office in the American Building, a block from the Hamilton County Courthouse, his shirt sleeves are rolled up, his tie loosened. During a conversation, he slips off his shoes and rests his feet, clad in gray socks, on his desk.

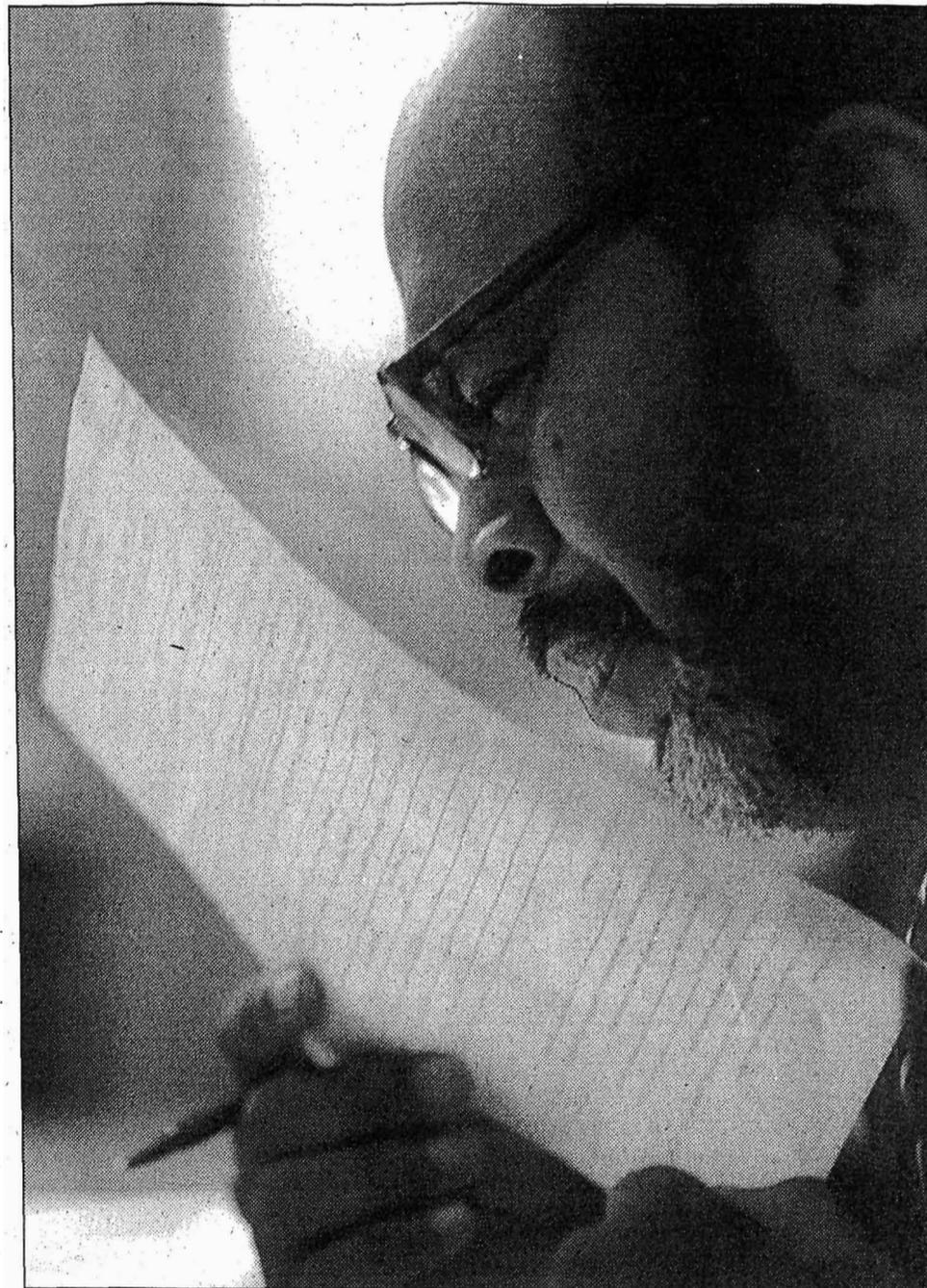
He's no stuffed shirt. He was solicited to join swanky country clubs after being elected president of the Cincinnati Bar Association in 1988, but said no thanks.

"I don't need other people's approval," he says. "I don't need to be liked. Judges, lawyers, police can't like you. They'll respect you. But if it's your mission in life to be liked, you can't do this work."

"I do think I'm civil toward people, and polite. A lot of people make the mistake, though, of thinking that just because you're not aggressive in the way you carry yourself, that you can't be."

Lawyers who have gone up against him in court know better.

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The Cincinnati Enquirer/Glenn Hart

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from most people. One day he walked up to me and said, 'If I pass you and don't say hi, it's because I'm losing my eyesight.'

"But he's never lost his smile."

He had that — and a sense of humor — 20 years ago when attorney Bea Larsen hired him fresh out of law school to work in the Legal Aid Society's public defender division. Because she brought several young lawyers on board at that time, Burlew gave her a nickname.

"I'd see him at the courthouse," says Larsen, who is now in private practice, "and he'd call down the corridor, 'Hi mom.' And I'd say, 'Hi son.' People's heads would turn with us not being the same skin color."

Before long, he was turning heads for other reasons, too.

"Being a lawyer for him meant being a very zealous defender," Larsen says. But unlike some defense lawyers, Burlew didn't come to work with an angry edge.

"He's friendly, but courageous and determined, which is an interesting mix in a defense lawyer," she says.

It's a mix that earns him the respect of the Hamilton County prosecutor's office, says chief assistant prosecutor Mark Piepmeier. He calls Burlew "a professional in every sense of the word."

## No great expectations

Growing up in Kennedy Heights, John Howard Burlew never had grand plans to become an attorney. There were no college graduates in his family. His father was a machinist for General Electric, and his mother was a nurses' aide for University Hospital. Neither is living.

At Walnut Hills High, he thrived on a tough curriculum. He also excelled in athletics, lettering in football, basketball and baseball.

Going to Walnut Hills helped open doors, he says, including one to Hanover College. After graduating with a liberal arts degree, he took a job with Avon Products in Springdale, where he worked in shipping and personnel.

Bored, he looked for something to fill his evenings. He started attending Chase College of Law simply because its classes fit into his schedule.

He knew no lawyers when he graduated. That's why he never forgot how much it meant when Larsen took him under her

court know better.

"In trial, he's a fighter," says Richard Gibson, assistant Hamilton County prosecuting attorney. "You better be prepared because he knows the case and you better know it, too."

Burlew knows, too, that there's a right way and wrong way to fight. That's what karate — he earned a black belt in the late 1970s, — has taught him.

"You can't fight when you're mad," he says. "When you're in a fight, you have to be able to assess the strengths of your opponent, and analyze your own weaknesses, then throw effective blows. The angrier you get, the more settled you have to become."

"Your No. 1 weapon is your brain."

But for a lawyer, surely eyes are an important tool.

"I'm not as effective as I know I could be," he says. "At least that's the way I figure it. But at the same time I tell myself, 'I think you do OK in the courtroom.'"

The courtroom is not where Burlew misses his eyesight most.

On his wooden desktop, under a sheet of glass, are numerous photos. Many are pictures of his daughters, Randi, 18, and Robin, 12.

"Work is not the most important thing that vision affects," he says. "Not seeing your children's faces completely, not being able to help them do homework, those things have a far greater affect on your quality of life."

There are other pictures on Burlew's desk. One shows an artery, almost pinched completely shut. Another shows the artery after it was unclogged by angioplasty on March 9.

Burlew thought the pains were indigestion. But then one day in juvenile court they became bad enough that he went to the

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hospital. Doctors unplugged his vessel the next day. "A wake-up call," Burlew says.

A black ashtray also sits on his desk. It is empty this day, and clean. For much of his life, he smoked two packs of Marlboros a day. He did, that is, until . . .

"March the 9th," he says with a laugh.

## Dedicated parent

A few weeks later after the office interview, the plan is to visit Burlew at his modest Tudor home in Kennedy Heights. It's no longer the semi-rural area it was when he was growing up, but he likes the idea of raising his kids in a middle-class, integrated neighborhood.

Burlew is home this evening, but not for long. He asks for a ride to Amberley Village, where Robin is in a soccer clinic.

"I never miss practices or my daughter's games," he says. "I'm not the coach. I don't have to be here. But I come."

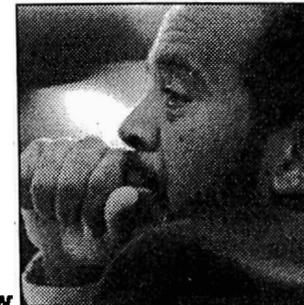
"It's hard for me to understand how busy some of these parents are who don't attend. There are lots of people who've never seen their children compete because they're busy. They're not busier than I am."

In addition to his private practice, Burlew is a member of the Ohio Civil Rights Commission, which enforces laws prohibiting discrimination. Paperwork arrives weekly in his office and he travels to Columbus every three weeks for meetings.

He sometimes hears politicians and business executives say they regret not spending more time with their families.

"I'm not gonna say that. Whatever else I may say or regret at the end of my life, I am not going to regret that I was not involved with my family."

Standing on the practice field, he can't see well enough to point Robin out, so he describes her: She's good enough to play on



John Burlew

a "select" team, designed for the to ers.

"What I got out of athletics is being to take criticism," Burlew says. At "also teaches you how to work hard personal bests. Not to be THE best, get a personal best each time."

## Case equally important

The defense attorney sometimes wonders that his best isn't good enough.

He sits on bleacher seat, behind a ball backstop, and lights a cigarette.

"Bad day today," he says.

He was involved in an "absurd" case. Two people got into a fight on the street. Charges were filed. Both were suspended. Their employer said if both were acquitted they could have their jobs back. Burlew was to mediate, so the case wouldn't go to trial.

But it did go to trial, and both were convicted of disorderly conduct. Both lost their jobs.

"It's funny. I've got these high-profile cases, but everybody's case is important. Ask somebody, is this little assault case? It's a huge case in that person's life. And I look on it as an absolute failure part."

He gets rid of the cigarette. Bea's 27-year addiction doesn't happen without some setbacks, too.

He's not sure he wants to spend his life practicing law. "There are other things I'd probably like to do. I think I'd like to be a coach. Be involved with kids, maybe teach elementary school."

## 'Like a little present'

And yet, lawyering is part of him.

"I go to any part of this city, from Anderson Township to Norwood, to West End, to Amberley Village. I know the policemen, the people on the street. I know the gamblers, the prostitutes, the murderers, the bank presidents, the council presidents, the teachers."

"It's a wonderful job I have ever had. It's like a little present that I get to open, and I don't know what's going to be in it. I get to defend the Constitution of the United States and get paid for it."

"I believe in this principle: innocent until proven guilty."