

LIGHT OF THEIR LIVES

Teen-agers who find themselves before judge pro tem Ralph Francis may get a new lease on life.

Teen-agers who wind up in the court of Ralph Francis may get locked up but they will also get an offer of lifetime assistance.

"I will always extend to them the opportunity to contact me if and when they are ready to re-enter society," said Francis, a patent attorney in Oakland who serves as judge pro tem in Alameda County Juvenile Court. "In some instances I get the call, sometimes, I don't. But I let them know that it is about rehabilitation not retribution."

Over the four years Francis has served as a juvenile court judge, he has taken 10 parolees under his wing. And with his financial assistance, three are now in community college and three more in four-year colleges. For this and other services the sole practitioner has performed for his community, he was recently recognized by the Points of Light Foundation based in Washington, D.C.

"Ralph is one of the most generous people I have ever come across in the amount of time he devotes to the community," said J. Bruce McCubbrey, a partner at Coudert Brothers in San Francisco who inspired Francis to become a lawyer. "He is just amazing."

A native of Bethlehem, Pa., Francis fought in Vietnam in the special operations unit of the U.S. Air Force. He came back and earned a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering and a master's in materials science.

In law school he spent seven months as an exchange student in Beijing, having learned Mandarin while an undergrad. There, he studied Chinese jurisprudence, which depends, he said, on looking beyond the written law to the underlying rationale behind it, a way of creative thinking that has helped him practice law in the United States.

Francis' community involvement began when he left the University of Michigan Law School in 1985 to clerk for U.S. District Court Judge Paul Simmons in Philadelphia. "I befriended a 13-year-old who was living on the street and I ended up being his Big Brother," Francis said. He helped find the boy, Dennis, a foster home, and kept in touch with him even after Francis moved to San Francisco to work for a short time at Pillsbury Madison & Sutro.

"I promised Dennis that if he got into any college anywhere he wouldn't have to pay for it," Francis said. Dennis was three years behind in school but quickly made up the grades. Today he is in graduate school at the University of San Diego on his way towards earning a master's degree in social work.

Once in San Francisco, Francis offered his services to a group called Attorneys For Children, which specialized in representing minors. It forced him to be a quick study in criminal law.

"The first case I had was a shaken baby case," Francis said. "I represented the minor mother who was 16. I was fortunate to appear before Judge Danny Weinstein who was patient with my lack of experience."

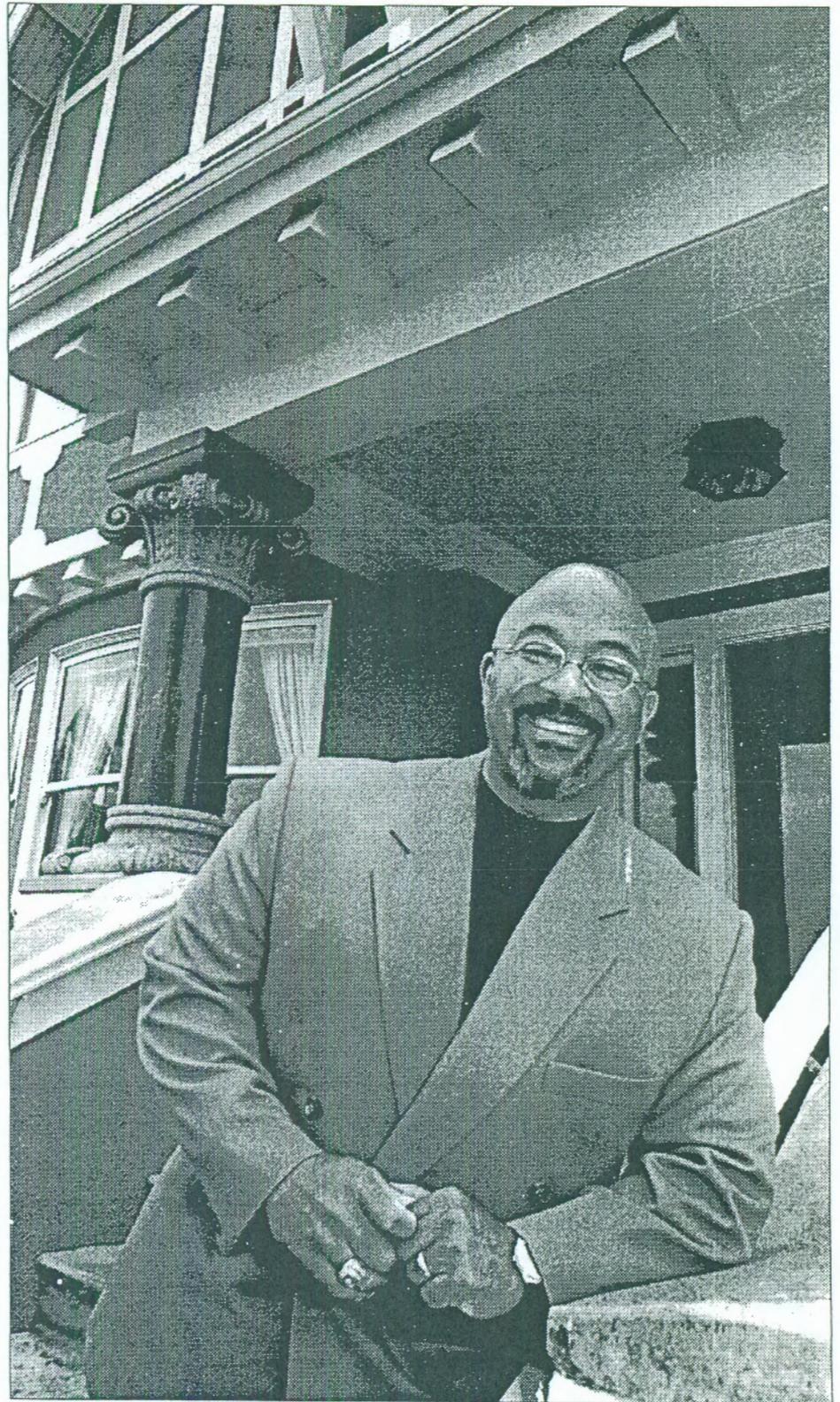
A father of two children of his own, Francis is a volunteer teacher at the Oakland School District and is working towards a full teachers certification with the goal of taking a year off of his law practice to teach full time.

He also helped found Project Hope, a program in Alameda County that sends attorneys to homeless shelters to provide basic tutoring to homeless children.

"I needed to instill in attorneys that on any given evening we may be inundated with kids or have no kids at all," Francis said. "But the warmth we get in return from their parents is incredible."

For the past 10 years he has also coached track and field to children with physical disabilities for the San Francisco Special Olympics. "It's a nice way to spend a Saturday morning," he said. "To spend a day with the kids, a different group of special kids."

— Marcy Burstiner



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