

## PEOPLE WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE



STAN BEHAL/SUN

Frank Walwyn, president of the Canadian Association of Black Lawyers and a star lawyer at the established law firm of WeirFoulds LLP, is mentoring articling student Ava-Gaye Colquhoun.

# A man with a mission

Star lawyer Frank Walwyn guides aspiring black students through the minefields of the legal profession

**SANDY NAIMAN**  
Toronto Sun

For many Toronto black youth, Frank Walwyn is like an alien from outer space.

He's made it, not in sports or entertainment but in a tougher arena — the panelled boardrooms and marbled halls of Bay Street's legal establishment.

When Walwyn ambles into a high school classroom, as he often does, what students see is a conservative black gent in a three-piece grey-flannel suit.

Then he starts talking, and by the time he's done, these hard-knock kids are pressing him to learn how to get into law school.

"He not only engages them, he tells them how hard they'll have to work to

achieve his kind of success," Central Technical School teacher Sandra Hill said after he spoke there during Black History Month.

"He also tells them that if they're qualified, they'll be able to break through the systemic barriers they face."

Modest and quick to share the limelight, Walwyn is a man with a mission.

### Powerful role model

As the only black lawyer and partner in one of Toronto's oldest, most influential law firms, WeirFoulds, and president of the Canadian Association of Black Lawyers (CABL), he helps young people go for professional gold.

He's a powerful role model for high school students and equally important, he guides graduate students through

the minefields of law school and beyond.

When Ava-Gaye Colquhoun, 27, was frustrated at Osgoode law school and didn't think she could make it, Walwyn was there for her.

"He always returned my phone calls, talked some sense into me, encouraged me and bounced ideas around with me," the newly minted graduate said. "But most of all he was living what I wanted to be."

As an articling student working 60 hours a week, she's following his lead at another Bay Street firm, but it's a little easier for her today than it was for him.

Walwyn, one of eight children of parents who moved from St. Kitts in 1973, has never shirked hard work. He graduated as valedictorian

from Emory Collegiate, but Queen's University law school was the real eye-opener.

For the first time in his life he realized there were bastions of privilege to which he had no access.

He recognized that in many ways the professions were inaccessible to the black community — and still are.

"There are many stereotypes which exist about how black people are, how well they can perform and what they do, but you dispel those very quickly when you excel at school," the star civil litigator said recently in the boardroom of WeirFoulds. "It's not about ability, it's about accessibility. You really need to give youth a chance to excel."

Walwyn is doing everything he can to encourage black youth within his community

to pursue more challenging careers. They're no different than any other youth except they have "a peculiar set of disadvantages to overcome," he said.

### Out of proportion

According to Roger Rowe, a CABL member who lives in the Jane-Finch area and practises family, criminal and immigration law there, the Safe Schools Act and zero-tolerance policy have "a disproportionately adverse impact on students of colour."

Even worse is the negative way the mainstream media reports on the black community, Walwyn stressed.

"A lot of this media coverage is hurting us and damaging opportunities for our youth," he said.

It feeds stereotypes held

by potential employers and fosters a belief in the black youth that there's no hope for them.

Rowe admires Walwyn's commitment and agrees with his analysis: "It's not the sole cause of the problem, but it's a significant factor."

With the support of WeirFoulds, which mandates community service, Walwyn is determined to project a different image and bring diversity to his profession.

"The essence of Frank is his commitment to his community," WeirFoulds senior litigator Bryan Finlay said.

"He's quite exceptional, a veritable dynamo, who serves the poorest right up to the richest. If you have a legal problem, Frank will listen."

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