



## St. Kitts-Born Frank Walwyn Blazes a Bay Street Trail

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By: Edward Keenan



FRANK WALWYN HAS fond memories of his childhood on the small Caribbean island of St. Kitts. His parents were professional educators, running their own school, and provided a comfortable life for Walwyn and his six siblings. “My family would’ve been characterized as an upper-middle class family in St. Kitts. You would have maids, nannies — things like that.”

That all changed when the family moved to Toronto in 1974. Walwyn was entering grade six when his family made the plummet to the lower end of the economic spectrum. “My parents couldn’t find work here. They struggled, it was a matter of each of them working two jobs, working in factories, essentially just trying to feed a very large family.”

Today, Walwyn is a commercial litigator and partner for WeirFoulds, one of Canada’s most respected law firms, and serves as president of the Canadian Association of Black Lawyers. Over lunch at the WeirFoulds offices in the Stock Exchange Tower, the poised, reserved Walwyn puzzles over his parents’ difficulties three decades ago. “There was no question as to qualifications and credentials, the only issue that arose when they got here was this nebulous ‘Canadian experience’ concept that has been used to keep many an immigrant down,” he says.

Of course, it is only in hindsight that Walwyn recognizes the extent of his parents’ struggle. As a boy, he was conscious of having to share a room with siblings and wearing hand-me-down clothes, but, “when you come to Canada from the Caribbean at a young age . . . you’re trying to cope with winter,” he says. “You’re pushed into a school system which is a bit foreign and you have no friends . . . those things are more of the impacts that I was aware of then.”

The reasoning behind the move is essential to the Walwyn family’s outlook on life: his parents moved their family here for the sake of their children. Walwyn’s older siblings were approaching university age and there were no universities in St. Kitts. “If the entire family didn’t move, it meant kids were away from home boarding somewhere, living away from home at a relatively young age.”

The valedictorian of his high school class, he initially failed to apply to university because he was afraid his family couldn't afford it, but the outrage of his parents and the intervention of teachers finally saw him enrol at the University of Toronto. From there he went on to Queen's University law school, working as an auto mechanic throughout his post-secondary education to pay the bills: "I'm probably the only Bay Street lawyer who can dismantle a Detroit 671 engine and put it back together," he says with a laugh.

He's unique on Bay Street for more than his skills with a wrench, however. Today, he is one of the few black partners at a major firm. Though Walwyn was the first-ever black associate at WeirFoulds, he has nothing but praise for the encouragement he received in building his career in a field dominated by establishment Canadians. "WeirFoulds is a firm that has been around since pre-Confederation. It must be doing many things right, [like] providing its young lawyers with incredible amounts of training and mentoring, together with practical experience. Historically, it would've been available only to white males. I was privileged to receive the benefit of this continuous drive to create excellence in young lawyers. This privilege creates a responsibility to give back where I can to those who look for assistance."

He does so primarily through the Canadian Association of Black Lawyers (CABL), in which he tries to ensure that others who come from groups traditionally under-represented in the legal profession benefit from similar mentoring and encouragement. He's also a member of the bar in his home country in St. Kitts and Nevis, and appears regularly before the courts there.

Looking back, he's troubled by what his parents went through. "My parents just celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary and spoke a bit about the move and about what they have seen their children accomplish. It was clear to me that they felt they had made the right decision and that it had paid off marvelously. [They came] to a new country and suffered a number of indignities, . . . because they were immigrants and because they were black, and I always wonder whether really, if I had the decision to make if I would do it." While he points out that Canada is among the best countries in the world for immigrants, he's troubled that many immigrant professionals still face difficulties getting jobs. "I think we are inching forward as people like myself are giving back to try to make a difference. All that moves society forward, inch by inch.