

Father-Son *Civil Rights Duo* Reflect on Family Legacy



William H. “Billy” Murphy, Jr., and his son, Hassan Murphy, run the Baltimore-based personal injury and civil rights firm, Murphy, Falcon & Murphy.

Established over 70 years ago by William H. Murphy Sr., himself a prolific lawyer and later a barrier-breaking judge, the multigenerational law practice was built on a nearly 200-year family dedication to the cause of freedom, a legacy their descendants never take for granted.

The Murphy story began with John Henry Murphy Sr. Born into slavery on Christmas in 1840, he served in a Union army regiment during the Civil War. In 1892, he founded what would become one of the longest-running Black newspapers in the nation, the *Baltimore Afro-American*. It remains in circulation today.

The Murphy story began with John Henry Murphy Sr. Born into slavery on Christmas in 1840, he served in a Union army regiment during the Civil War.

Great grandfather Murphy’s courage and dedication set his family on a course to lead the civil rights movement for generations to come. He surely helped inspire three of his grandsons, including two who were born long after he died, to each leave their major marks on the Maryland bench and bar.

Murphy, Falcon & Murphy lawyers have since litigated cases in 32 states, 20 different federal courts, and even argued before foreign courts. All told, the firm has racked up nearly a billion dollars in verdicts and settlements for their clients over the years in matters ranging from police brutality to personal injury.

Hassan has blazed a trail for more Black attorneys to act as lead counsel in class actions. Since he joined, Murphy Falcon & Murphy has led more than 50 class actions, including against Equifax, Google, and Facebook.

Murphy, Jr., who humbly insisted on going by Billy in our interview, described his winding road into the legal profession that began with earning an aerospace engineering degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Hired as an engineer for the Martin Co. (now Martin Marietta Co.) in 1965, Billy was one of only seven Black engineers, among thousands of white colleagues.

“It was an oppressive environment racially, and I couldn’t wait to leave,” he said.

Science was Billy’s first calling. Amid the heyday of space exploration, he saw amazing promise in the goal to extend life beyond Earth.

Billy soon grew unhappy at work, however. Stricken with stomach knots, headaches, and stress over the racism he experienced, he decided to attend law school.

His father was practicing law in Baltimore at the time Billy had the revelation, though the elder Murphy wasn’t yet elected judge. Billy described his father’s supportive, yet bemused, response when he broke the news that he planned to leave engineering for law.

“It was an ‘I-told-you-so’” chuckle, Billy recalled.

His father had warned him about racism in corporate America at the time, and Billy now recognized he was right.

“I said, ‘Dad, help me, don’t hurt me,’ and we had a good laugh about it,” Billy recalled.

Billy credits most of his success to his father and mother, Madeline — an activist in her own right and three-time Baltimore City Council candidate.

“I thank God every day that He landed me in the home of Madeline and William Murphy,” he said.

Ultimately, the move to the legal profession has been good to him and Billy hasn’t looked back.

“Although it isn’t insurance against racism, it’s the freest a Black man can be in America,” Billy said of practicing law. “It’s been a rich career.”

Billy practiced with his father for just under one year before the elder was elected Judge in 1970 and left private practice.

The Next Generation

As Billy gained prominence in his early legal career throughout the 1970s, he quickly earned a reputation as a solid litigator. He would also don the robe, like his father, and was elected Baltimore Circuit Court Judge in 1980.

The bench proved temporary for Billy, however. In 1983, after a run for Baltimore mayor, he returned to private practice.

Later when Billy’s son, Hassan, decided to attend law school at Georgetown University, it appeared the profession was now coursing through the Murphy bloodline, but Hassan naturally wanted to carve out his own path.

Recruited heavily by New York firms, Hassan took a partnership-track position at Curtis, Mallet-Prevost, Colt & Mosle, one of the oldest law firms in the country, where he focused on complex international transactions and major corporate mergers and acquisitions.

“I was having fun, living in New York, and handling lots of big transactions,” Hassan recalled. “My wife was pregnant; we just bought an apartment, and I got this call from my dad.”

Billy called Hassan to consult on a case involving celebrity boxing promoter Don King, who had retained Billy to defend federal criminal wire fraud charges in 1998.

Hassan’s initial reaction was resistance. “But dad was persistent,” he said.

That case was the catalyst that brought father and son together professionally, but Hassan ended up staying for 20 years and counting even after they prevailed on behalf of Mr. King.



A mutual respect became apparent when each man claimed to have learned more from the other.

It was only supposed to be a temporary leave of absence from his New York firm, but “I only found out about that years later,” Billy teased Hassan.

Their close relationship was shaped by working together over the next two decades, and a mutual respect became apparent when each man claimed to have learned more from the other.

“I’ve learned so much from my father,” Hassan said. Billy retorted, “it’s not the traditional patriarchal relationship, actually I’ve learned so much more from him.”

“His vision is spectacular for what the firm ought to be,” Billy said, praising Hassan. “Our firm is living out his vision.”

Central to that vision has always been a commitment to representing people, the Murphys said. Murphy, Falcon & Murphy, now boasting a roster of nine lawyers and a dozen or so staff, has intentionally avoided building a list of institutional clients.

“We did not want to be beholden to corporate interests,” Hassan said. In some ways, we made things harder on ourselves, he joked.

We have worked very hard to make sure our personal and professional interests are aligned, Hassan said, and “I can’t see us doing it any other way.”

All Murphy Falcon & Murphy lawyers are steeped in community involvement and politics, which “goes hand-in-hand with how we practice,” according to Hassan. The firm has won hundreds of awards for both community service and for excellence in the practice of law.

It’s a commitment to justice and community service that’s been uniquely characteristic of the Murphy family for more than a century.

Judge William H. Murphy Sr.

Billy’s father, the late William H. Murphy Sr., enrolled in 1939 as only the third Black student to attend the University of Maryland’s law school. After graduation, he established a law practice in Baltimore’s Cherry Hill neighborhood. He became one of the first Black judges in Maryland when he was elected to the bench in 1970.

Throughout his career, Murphy Sr. was known as a tremendous mentor to younger Black attorneys. Murphy Sr. died in 2003 at the age of 86.

Throughout their lives, he and his wife, Madeline, were both active in the community and in the civil rights movement.

“When I was growing up, and when Hassan was growing up, some of the national leaders of the Black movement visited our home and spent the night with us,” Billy said.

Those experiences obviously impressed the young man. As a teen, Billy successfully organized the Cherry Hill community to force the closing of an incinerator that was polluting the neighborhood.

Billy eventually attended the University of Maryland, his father’s law alma mater, where earned a spot on law review and founded a chapter of the Black Law Students Association.

As a student, he advocated for admissions ratio targets for Black and female law students, which the school adopted in 1968.

Family instilled in him both good morals and a servant’s heart, which Billy said has been foundational to his success.

“We came from strong families that taught us right from wrong and the importance of service to the Black community and to the larger community,” Billy said.

Unfinished Business

Billy and Hassan reflected on the progress made in the civil rights movement, and the fruits of their own prolific careers, while contrasting those gains with set-backs on racial progress in recent years.

“It is deeply disturbing that racism is still alive and well among a substantial portion of the white population,” Billy said. “That is distressing.”

Billy said he is concerned about the direction of national politics and fears an ultra-conservative Supreme Court might jeopardize progress that has been made on civil rights.

“It is deeply disturbing that racism is still alive and well among a substantial portion of the white population.”

He cited rulings that gutted preclearance in the Voting Rights Act, the congressional reapportionment process, and other policies that protect minority communities even before the balance of the court more drastically shifted.

“I’m deathly afraid that they will nullify the progress we have made,” Billy said.

“The last four years has exposed how deep racism and sexism are in America,” Hassan added. Though dispiriting, both father and son have found motivation in current events to re-intensify their efforts in the firm.

“We have turned these incredibly serious problems into some real energy,” said Hassan.

It comes from a resilient, fighting spirit both men have exhibited in their personal and professional lives, but they consistently direct all due credit to the community that lifted them up.

“We owe everything to the Black community and to whites of good will,” Billy said. “I could not ask for better treatment than I’ve had from those two communities.”

“We owe even more to our clients who entrust us to handle the most important problems in their lives,” he said. “It is truly a blessing and we hope that history will show that we’ve lived up to the challenge.”