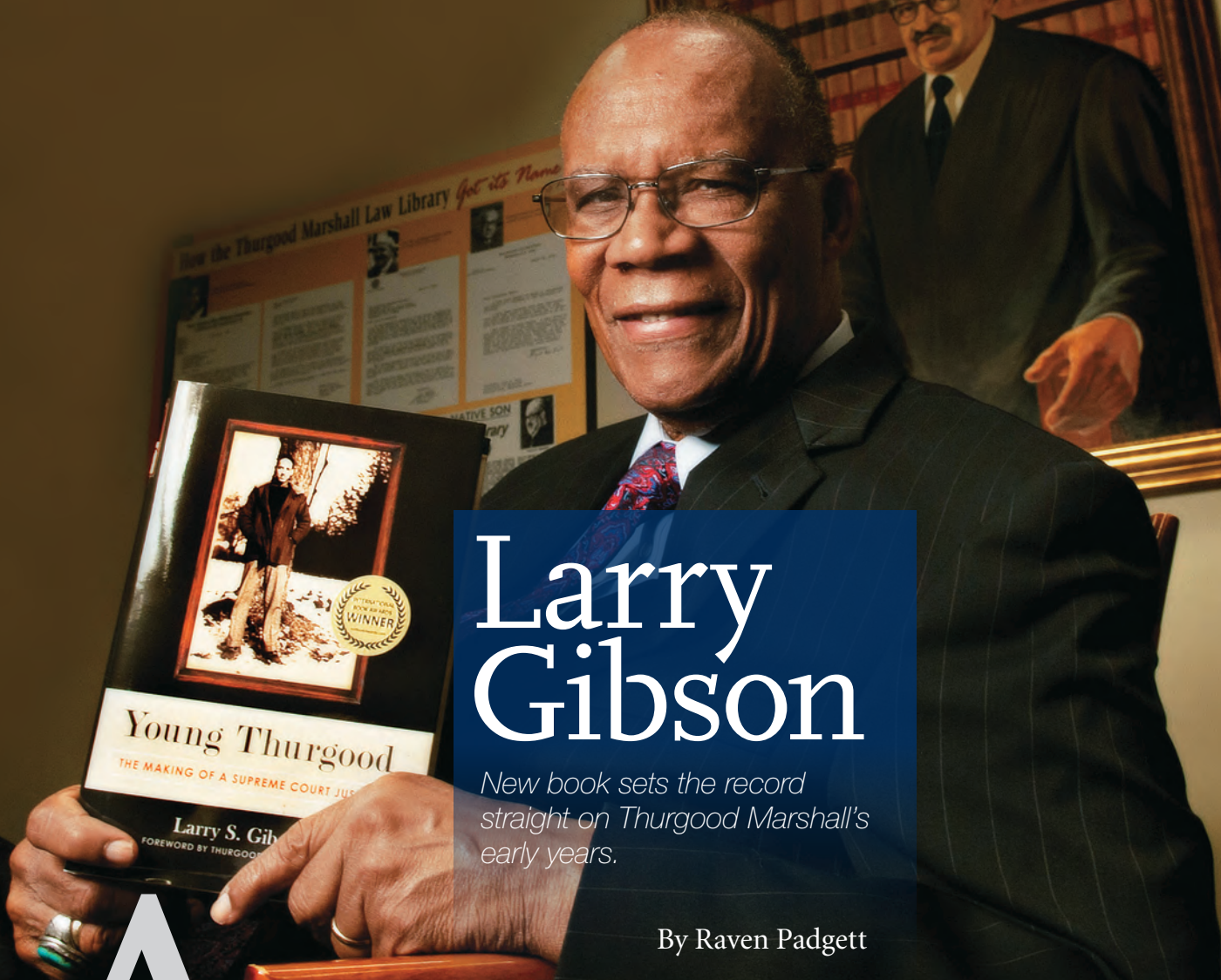


# Profiles in Leadership



## Larry Gibson

*New book sets the record straight on Thurgood Marshall's early years.*

By Raven Padgett

As planes take off from the Baltimore Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport, there is a feeling of great pride that a major travel hub bears the name of the first African-American Supreme Court justice. For Larry S. Gibson (B.A. '64), the principal advocate for passing the legislation to rename the airport, it is a fitting tribute to a Baltimorean who soared to unprecedented heights in the nation's history.

With the release of his book, *Young Thurgood: The Making of a Supreme Court Justice*, Gibson, a longtime

University of Maryland law professor and political activist, has further ensured that Marshall's legacy endures for generations to come. The book covers extensively the people and places that shaped Marshall, years before his arguments in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case desegregated public schools and transformed the landscape for racial equality in the United States.

*Young Thurgood* revisits Marshall's early life in segregated West Baltimore, his undergraduate studies at Lincoln University and his time at Howard

University School of Law, where he was the only student in 1933 to graduate *cum laude*. And history buffs will appreciate how it captures the nuances of Baltimore's Black legal community, starting from the turn of the century until the 1930s.

"I wanted this book to be an exception to the other books written about Marshall. I wanted to write a book that provided a strong picture of his formative years and showed how he became the man he was," Gibson says.

The book also allows Gibson to "set the record straight" about Marshall's legacy,

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he says, and dispel myths that have evolved over the years.

“I would hear information about him that was simply not true. One of my colleagues said to me one day, ‘If you’re so unhappy with the way Marshall is portrayed, then why don’t you write your own book?’” Gibson recalls.

For example, Gibson discounts the long-held belief that Marshall applied to and was rejected from the University of Maryland Law School. In fact, he explains, Marshall already knew the law school was segregated and therefore would never have been inclined to apply. Another myth, Gibson says, is that Marshall disliked his hometown. Not true either. Although Marshall despised the segregation in Baltimore, he had fond memories of the community in which he grew up, Gibson explains.

*Young Thurgood*, which took more than 10 years to complete, is getting rave reviews. It received the 2013 International Book Award for biography and is the only one endorsed by the Marshall family. In the

foreword, Thurgood Marshall Jr. writes: “Readers will see in this book the origins of my father’s penchant for storytelling and his desire to act as an advocate for fairness on behalf of those who are marginalized in American society.”

Gibson’s interest in writing the book also stems from his admiration of Marshall’s career. He still vividly recalls their first meeting—July 1, 1975. Then a novice Maryland attorney, he knocked on the door of Marshall’s Virginia home late one night. He and one of his colleagues were there to ask for help securing an emer-

gency order for a client. After 20 minutes discussing the order, the justice signed it. But it was the next two hours that stayed with Gibson.

“We thought we would be there for a brief time, but we were at his house until 2 in the morning,” Gibson says with a laugh. “We spent very little time discussing the business at hand, and the next two hours discussing our backgrounds and his life in Baltimore. Many of us young Black lawyers were proud of him, but we didn’t know him personally. This showed me a personal side.”

### Young Gibson

Like Marshall, Gibson is a Baltimorean. He graduated from Baltimore City College, where he was the first African-American class officer. At Howard, he served as president of the student body and as chair of D.C. Students for Civil Rights. He graduated from Columbia Law School in 1967, the same year that Marshall began serving on the Supreme Court. In 1972, Gibson became the first African-American law professor at the University of Virginia. He joined the faculty of the University of Maryland School of Law in 1974, where he currently teaches evidence, civil procedure, race and the law, and election law.

“Every year the students are the same age; it’s perpetual youth, which I enjoy,” he says. “I’m also now teaching second generations of students.”

Gibson’s career includes serving in the U.S. Justice Department as associate deputy attorney general during President Jimmy Carter’s administration. He has also worked on several political campaigns, including as Maryland state chairman for the Clinton-Gore presidential campaign, and as campaign manager for former Howard law school dean and Baltimore mayor Kurt Schmoke.

“He managed my campaigns for state’s attorney for Baltimore City and for

mayor of Baltimore. The result was five victories in five elections,” says Schmoke, vice president and general counsel for Howard University. “The advice he gave me that stands out the most was never ask your volunteers to do something you would not do yourself, and thank people daily for the small and big things that are done to help the political campaign. I think he learned those lessons running student elections at Howard University.”

Schmoke is not surprised at the success of *Young Thurgood*. “Because of the depth of his research and his unique knowledge of the history of the African-American community in early 20th-century Baltimore, Professor Gibson has written a most insightful biography of Justice Marshall.”

### Preserving Marshall’s Legacy

After Maryland Del. Emmett C. Burns Jr. introduced legislation in 2005 to rename BWI Airport, Gibson organized and led the lobbying and negotiating efforts to get it passed through the state Senate, even becoming involved in getting the highway signs changed to reflect the new airport name. He wants young people to not only recognize the magnitude of Marshall’s contributions, including his service on the Supreme Court for 24 years, but also to understand how it grew from the foundation that his family, friends and colleagues provided.

As Gibson continues to tour the U.S. promoting his book, he says he is already working on a new one. In his second book, he plans to chronicle the next chapter in Marshall’s life, from 1938 to 1948. But in *Young Thurgood*, he has added fresh research to the historical canon in the U.S.

“I hope that when people finish reading my book, especially young people, they will see how much a single young person can accomplish,” Gibson says. ■

*Padgett is the editor of Howard Magazine.*