



## Billy Martin, senior partner, Blank Rome, Washington, DC

[by Regan Morris]

**If you're ever arrested in Washington, DC, having Billy Martin's phone number couldn't hurt.**

**LawCrossing speaks with the veteran trial attorney about his practice at Blank Rome and how a minor car accident led him to a law career.**

During a summer break from Howard University, William R. "Billy" Martin was driving in his hometown of Pittsburgh when he was rear-ended by a guy in a flashy Porsche. Fortunately, no one was injured in the crash, but Martin was livid. He jumped from his car and argued with the offending driver.

"The driver started smiling and said, 'What do you do?' I told him I was an undergraduate student thinking of going to business school," Martin said. "He was a lawyer. And he said, 'The way you argue, you should consider law school.'"

The lawyer paid for the damage to Martin's car and showed him around his small law firm, explaining how he worked. Martin was intrigued. When he graduated from Howard, he accepted a scholarship to study law at the University of Cincinnati.

Now a partner with Blank Rome in Washington, Martin was ranked fourth on the *Washingtonian's* 2004 list of top lawyers in Washington, DC. Martin is a seasoned trial attorney with a practice that is about 65 percent criminal and 35 percent civil. He has argued civil and criminal cases before federal and state courts throughout the country and is perhaps best known for representing famous athletes, Monica Lewinsky's mother, and Chandra Levy's parents. Martin, 55, has handled numerous white-collar investigations and spent 15 years as an Assistant U.S. Attorney in various cities.

Working for the government is an invaluable way to gain trial experience, he said.

After law school, Martin joined the City of Cincinnati as an Assistant City Prosecutor and a few years later became an Assistant United States Attorney in the Southern District of Ohio. He became Special Attorney in the Organized Crime Strike Force in San Francisco before moving to Washington in 1980 as an Assistant United States Attorney for the District of Columbia. The DC post is unique because attorneys there handle both state and federal crimes, perfect training for Martin's future criminal practice.

"You had a lot of discretion, a lot of authority as a young AUSA," Martin said. "I probably had 20 to 25 trials under my belt before I was 30. That's a lot of experience."

When young attorneys come to Blank Rome looking for jobs, Martin often advises them to get some government experience first.

"We encourage associates here to try to get experience either as an AUSA or as securities SEC litigators or other governmental agencies before they come so that we're really comfortable sending them into the room with us," he said. "People come here for job interviews, and they wonder, 'If I wanted to do something that would really help my status, what is it?' Well, we like to hire and train our own, but sometimes we do lateral hires for specific needs. We like to look at people who can show they have the experience and can pick up a file and really help us."

Martin became involved with professional athletes through his ties to former Pittsburgh Pirates President Carl Barger and

a meeting with former Georgetown University men's basketball coach John Thompson and Thompson's agent, David Falk.

"David Falk was also the agent for [NBA stars] Allen Iverson, Juwan Howard, Rod Strickland, and Michael Jordan. I don't do any of Michael's work, but he was the agent, a super agent," Martin said of Falk. "And I developed a relationship where I was brought in by David and his company to do all of the criminal work for all of his then-clients."

Martin has also represented former heavyweight boxing champ Riddick Bowe, and last year, he successfully defended Jayson Williams on charges of aggravated manslaughter in the shooting of his chauffeur.

Williams was acquitted of first-degree manslaughter, but the jury was hung on charges of second-degree manslaughter. Martin could not comment on the case because of a gag order.

Martin said he still gets a thrill being in a courtroom, and he counts the late Johnnie Cochran as one of his closest friends and mentors. The two attorneys worked together and even came up against each other on several discrimination cases. But Martin never got the chance to go against Cochran to verdict; all the cases settled.

"Even now, after 30 years of doing litigation, I still love to go into a courtroom to handle matters," he said. "It's still that pause when the jury or judge is about to render a verdict, where your stomach is in knots. I still get



adrenaline charges and experience the rush—as you call it—doing trial work.”

Martin attributes his success to an innate gift to argue and lots of hard work.

“To the extent that I’ve been successful, I think it’s been first having a God-given skill of being able to argue a case and then prepare myself, but then never, ever being surprised,” he said. “You can train good lawyers, but you can’t train great lawyers. They always have something given that’s a little special. Like athletes—you can train athletes to do specific things, but those that are special have God-given skills.”

Blank Rome likes to train young attorneys, Martin said, adding that the firm prides itself on building diverse trial teams. For example, trial teams generally include a senior partner like Martin, plus a junior partner, a senior associate, a junior associate, and one or more paralegals.

“We try to give lawyers a chance to be first-chair, second-chair, or third-chair,” he said. “And the younger lawyers start out in the back row watching, move up to the third-chair, second-chair, and hopefully they’ll move me down and take over as first-chair in some of these cases.”

Young attorneys need to stay on their toes, always be prepared, and anticipate the other side’s moves. And lawyers shouldn’t sleep too much.

“Prepare yourself, and don’t think that the opponent is sleeping right now,” he said. “Your opponent is probably still preparing while you’re pausing. So get back at it. You want to be able to be one step ahead.”