



alumni profile

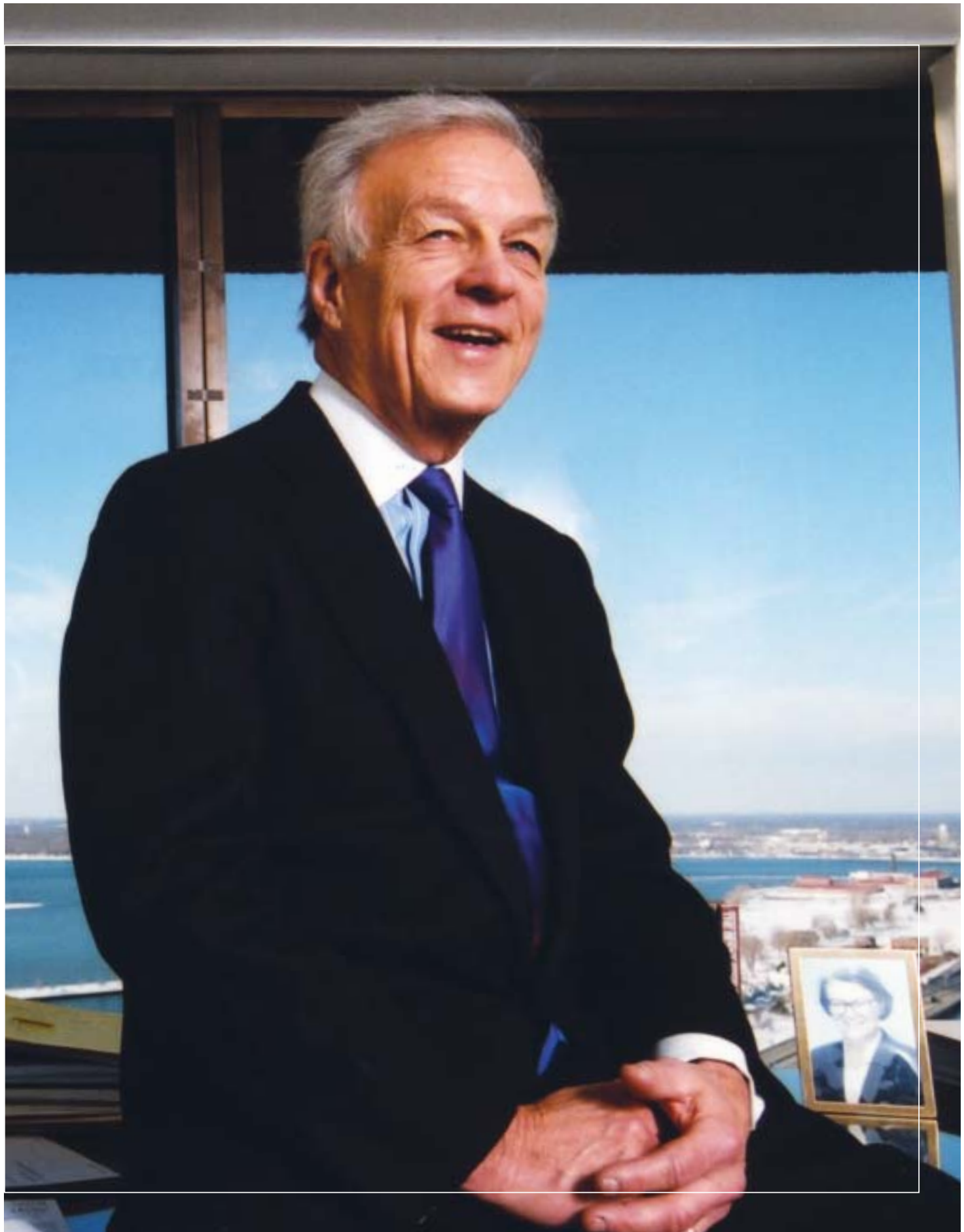
# tryingTIMES

by audrey r. browka

Richard F. Griffin recounts his efforts to bring about fairness and equality during an era of civil rights struggles.

**IT WAS OCTOBER 1962. The Cuban Missile Crisis was erupting 90 miles off the Florida coast. The Viet Cong were organizing into battalion-sized units throughout Vietnam. And the United States was in the midst of a modern-day civil rights struggle: President John F. Kennedy sent troops to quell riots at the University of Mississippi following the admission of the school's first black student; the Supreme Court ruled segregation was unconstitutional on all transportation facilities; and the Department of Defense ordered the full integration of military reserve units.**

**Closer to home, a 29-year old trial lawyer from Buffalo was about to become embattled in a civil rights struggle of a different kind. Black Muslims, incarcerated at Attica State Prison, filed suit against New York claiming the state failed to recognize the Nation of Islam as a legitimate religious group and therefore denied them the same religious freedoms afforded other prisoners. Assigned by the court to represent the prisoners was a young lawyer from the firm of Moot, Sprague, Marcy and Gulick. His name was RICHARD F. GRIFFIN '54.**



“THE STATE CONSIDERED THESE BLACK MUSLIM PRISONERS a bunch of radicals so they were not allowed to practice their religion in prison,” explains Griffin. “They were not allowed to have a minister visit them in their cells. They could not receive or read literature about their religion. They were forbidden to read the Koran and forbidden to observe Ramadan.”

Up until his appointment to this case, Griffin represented railroad companies in civil litigation. He admits he had a lot to learn about the Nation of Islam. Griffin was a quick study but he knew the court would need to hear from an expert on the subject. At that time in history, there was no greater expert than Malcolm Little, better known as Malcolm X – the black militant leader who advocated for Black Nationalism and racial pride.

“I was in New York for a meeting with the state bar,” recalls Griffin. “I called him up – cold – and was able to reach him at Temple #7 in Harlem.”

The two met over dinner to discuss the pending case and Malcolm X readily agreed to travel to Buffalo to serve as Griffin’s expert witness. Malcolm’s primary task: to convince the judge that the Nation of Islam was indeed a valid religion.

“I remember sitting in court and Malcolm slipped me a note,” says Griffin. “It read: *Only bona fide Muslims are entitled to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Elijah Muhammed (a prophet of God [Allah] in the Nation of Islam) made the pilgrimage to Mecca, ergo, Elijah Muhammad must be a legitimate Muslim representative and servant of God.*”

With Malcolm X on the stand, Griffin pursued that point and the testimony proved vital to the success of the case. The judge ruled the Nation of Islam a legitimate religion and ordered that it be recognized by the state prison system. For Griffin, the win would be the first of several victories – both professionally and personally – in correcting and preventing minority injustices.

“The Jesuits used to say we are custodians of what we have; meaning we’re supposed to be out there using our God-given talents, abilities and education for the benefit of society,” states Griffin. “They conditioned us to take the proverbial fork in the road and invest in our community. I suppose one of the forks I chose to take addressed issues of minority rights and the advancement of minorities. It’s always been a concern of mine.”

So much so that in 1972, when leading Buffalo civil rights advocate Norman Goldfarb

invited him to join a group of attorneys that were preparing to file a desegregation lawsuit against the Buffalo School System, Griffin accepted. He was one of five attorneys selected to represent the local NAACP, the Citizens Council for Human Relations and several other parties in their cause to advance desegregation. They sued the city of Buffalo, the superintendent of schools, the board of education, the mayor and the common council.

Ironically, Griffin argued the landmark case before another Canisius College alumnus: U.S. District Court Judge John Curtin ’43,

Malcolm X provided expert testimony for Griffin, when he defended Black Muslim prisoners at Attica State Prison in their 1962 lawsuit against New York. The prisoners claimed the state denied their right to religious freedom when it failed to recognize the Nation of Islam as a legitimate religious group.



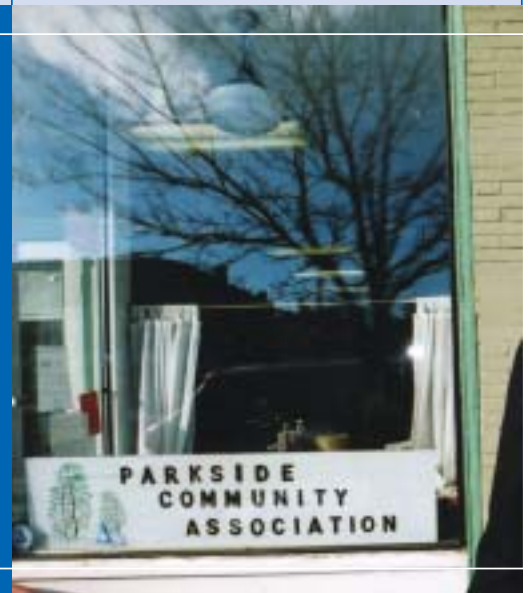
who eventually handed down a court order directing the city of Buffalo to integrate its public schools so that children of all backgrounds would have access to the best education.

“At the time, most people considered this a busing case, in that there would be a change of places where children would go to school,” explains Griffin. “But this was not a busing case. It was an education case and many positive things transpired as a result.”

The ruling enabled the Buffalo Board of Education to close several old schools that were operating under capacity. It also qualified the Buffalo School System for a significant boost in federal grant money. The city’s Magnet School Program, which today includes City Honors, the Buffalo School for the Performing Arts and Buffalo Traditional School, was also established as a result of the desegregation ruling, as were Buffalo’s Early Childhood Centers, which

serve educationally and economically disadvantaged children in the inner city, and the Montessori Schools, which support the development of a responsible, culturally diverse community of individual learners.

For his role in the case, Griffin received the William G. Conable Award from the Citizen Council on Human Relations; the Brotherhood/ Sisterhood Award from the National Conference of Christians and Jews; and the Medgar Evers Award from the Buffalo branch of the NAACP, of which he is a lifetime member.



At the same time Griffin was garnering a courtroom reputation as a defender of minority rights, he was also becoming a community leader for the cause. In the early 1960s, Griffin marched in front of then Bishop James McNulty’s house to protest the transfer of a proactive parish assistant from an inner city church. And when it appeared real estate agents were engaging in block-busting activities throughout the city, Griffin and fellow community advocate Jack Anthony took steps to thwart these efforts in the Parkside neighborhood, in which they lived.

“Back then, when a black family purchased a home in a white neighborhood, real estate agents would tell the white people on the street that their property values were going to go down,” explains Anthony. “They would try to scare white people into selling their homes so they could make a profit.”

To keep these alleged blockbusting attempts out of their backyard, Griffin and

Anthony initiated a grassroots campaign. They went door-to-door distributing leaflets to educate the community and hosted neighborhood meetings to address the issue. Their efforts culminated in 1962 with the foundation of the Parkside Community Association.

“Our goal in establishing the Parkside Community Association was to build a very strong neighborhood that emphasized the advantages of living there,” explains Griffin. “We were going to be a community association that made sure there was no discrimination. We were going to improve

Community Association Board of Directors. “There is not a huge predominance of one race, income or age. It’s a neighborhood of balance and I attribute that, in large part, to the work of the association and Dick Griffin, whose clarity of vision is true to his life mission of ensuring fairness and equality.”

“There are a lot of things you try to do for the community but too often, because of time, energy or money, it doesn’t work out,” adds Griffin. “The success of the Parkside Community Association was one of the exceptions.”

member, he was very interested in making sure we had genuine diversity at the high school level. Since he concluded his term in June, we have made a lot of progress and increased both student and staff minority enrollment.”

It’s now been more than four decades since that 29-year old trial lawyer won his first victory for minority rights. In that time he has recorded a history of similar successes and is working to add a few new ones to the list. As a member of the Buffalo & Erie County Botanical Gardens Society, Griffin spearheads efforts to transfer the county-owned-and-operated facility to a not-for-profit corporation, so the gardens may receive private sector financial support. This self-proclaimed environmentalist also serves as a board member for the Olmsted Parks Conservancy, which provides supplementary maintenance and enhancement services to several parks throughout the city. And while Griffin’s community contributions can make for a demanding schedule, he is grateful to his wife, Dr. Jane Flanigen Griffin, principal scientist at the Hauptman Woodward Research Institute, whom he says is “unconditionally understanding.” It helps, he notes, that “she is equally invested in the Buffalo community.”

“My wife and I have always lived here; we received all our education here; and we want the city to continue to be the great place it is. So, we’ve always tried to live as the Jesuits intended by using our means, assets and abilities to be men and women for others.”

Certainly, Griffin has fulfilled those charges. Although he has lessened his role in recent years, at age 71, Richard F. Griffin continues to champion others to take that proverbial fork in the road – particularly to help advance the cause of minorities. Most telling were his remarks at the Canisius College Distinguished Alumni Dinner, in November, where Griffin was awarded for outstanding professional achievement.

He said, “I’ve gone down several forks in the road relative to the status of minorities in our community and probably haven’t gone far enough. I think that’s true of most people and most institutions. There is a fork in the road in this community that we know about but have much farther to take. This fork needs many more investors and much more capital, both figuratively and literally.”

The returns, adds Griffin, “make for a more compassionate society in which everyone can live.” ■



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— RICHARD GRIFFIN

our schools by forming school committees. We were going to continually spruce up the neighborhood by having clean up-fix up campaigns. And we were going to get after anyone who violated the zoning rules or did not keep their property up physically.”

More than 40 years after its establishment, the Parkside Community Association continues to carry out the charter established by its founders Richard Griffin and Jack Anthony. And although Griffin no longer resides in the Parkside neighborhood, he regards his role in the formation of the association among his greatest accomplishments. It outweighs, he says, even his most notable courtroom successes because the Parkside area is considered the only fully integrated neighborhood in the city of Buffalo.

“I don’t know the latest figures on our status but when you look at the demographics of the city of Buffalo, the Parkside community is the most balanced neighborhood,” states Ruth Lampe, who sits on the Parkside

**DESPITE THE CHALLENGES** that Griffin says can often accompany change – in any community – he continues to advocate for minority advancement. During his tenure as partner and now counsel at the law firm of Philips Lytle LLP, where he concentrates his practice in contested matters, and serves as settlement counsel and a mediator or arbitrator, Griffin instituted a minority task force to recruit minority attorneys to the private practice of law.

Most recently, Griffin served as a “minority voice” on the Canisius High School Board of Trustees, where he considered it his personal responsibility to raise the question about minority recruiting in relation to students, faculty, administrators and staff.

“Dick Griffin is a provocative and progressive thinker and questioner,” states Canisius High School President Rev. James Higgins MS ’90, S.J. “He has a great social consciousness and awareness. He accepts no quick answers and as a board