

NORTHWEST PASSAGES

THE PEOPLE AND PLACES OF NORTHWEST WASHINGTON

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After fighting murder rap, football star turns to law

By **DEIRDRE BANNON**
Current Staff Writer

On James King's first day of law school at the University of the District of Columbia, like many other students, he was nervous.

"Petrified, actually," King said, recalling his first semester in fall 2009. "I walked around campus with two books: one legal dictionary and one regular one. The biggest shock to overcome was the vocabulary of the students I was going to school with — nobody was using 5 cent words anymore."

But that wasn't the only thing King was worried about. He also wondered how he would be perceived. As an undergraduate, King played Division I football for Central Michigan University. But on the cusp of what was expected to be a promising career in the NFL, he was accused of second-degree murder. He was not convicted, and he maintains his complete innocence, but he spent some time in jail on a lesser charge.

Fueled by the tragic events that changed the course of his life, King's passion for football gave way to a passion for justice — and he looked to the law, and UDC, for redemption. He graduated this spring, praised as one of the school's standouts.

King's story begins outside of Detroit, where he grew up the second youngest of six children. His father died when he was 2, and his mother raised the family on her own. Football featured early in King's life, as did hard work. When he was 14, King's family couldn't afford the cleats he needed to join

the high school team, so King asked his coach if he could earn the money by mowing the coach's lawn. It was a win-win for everyone, and by the time King was a senior, he was being recruited by Division I teams from around the country.

He opted to stay close to home, going to Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant in 2000. King was a four-year starter, playing safety and linebacker. He broke school and NCAA records for blocked punts — and there was talk that he could make the NFL.

King wasn't just an athlete; he was active in campus issues, and started a student group called the Non-Violence Coalition, which urged the school's administration to recognize Martin Luther King Jr. Day. After the students lobbied the school for a year and half, the administration finally agreed to honor the national holiday.

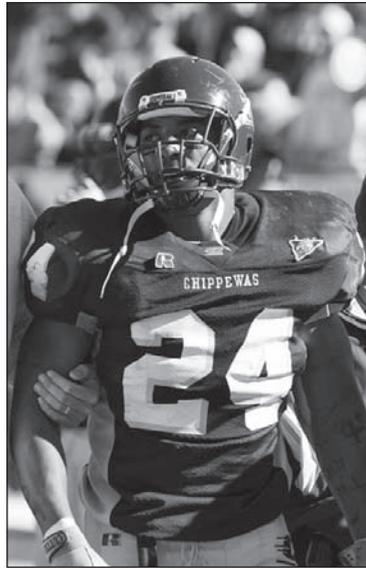
"The summer before my senior year, I thought the sky was the limit," King said.

Then everything changed.

Out one night in June 2004, celebrating a friend's recent job acceptance — a friend King helped pull out of homelessness — the two were exiting a Mount Pleasant, Mich., bar when a fight suddenly broke out among dozens on the street. King said he tried to break it up, but one man was critically injured. Nearly three weeks later, that man died from his injuries.

In the days following the fight, King called the victim's family to see how he was doing, and went to police to offer information about what happened that night.

As police launched their investi-



gation, King finished his senior year at Central Michigan and was signed by the Cleveland Browns.

But before he could suit up for his first NFL game, King was blindsided: He, along with six others, was charged with second-degree murder in relation to the fight.

"It hit me like a ton of bricks," said King. "I was so devastated I couldn't speak."

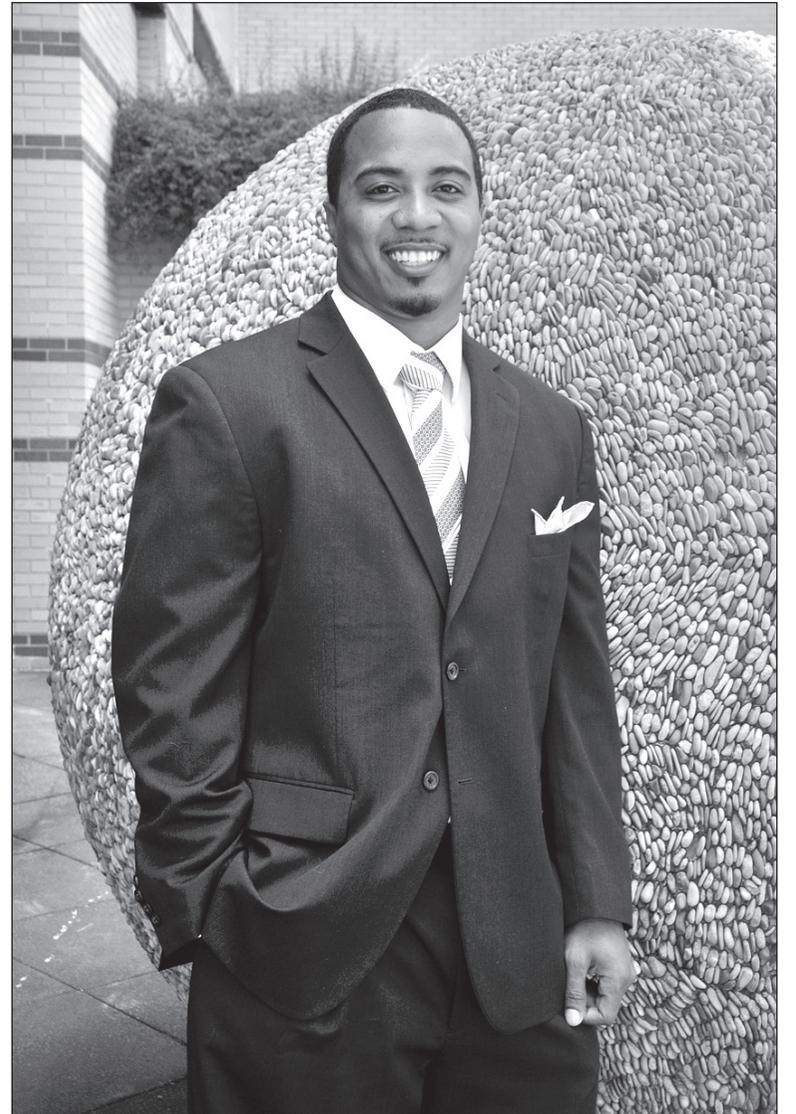
The Cleveland Browns dropped him. King's family scrambled to find a criminal attorney and come up with money for the retainer. They were also fighting to reduce the \$1.25 million bail that was set. Community members rallied around King: Former coaches took out loans, and inner-city kids who King had mentored offered to put up their college tuition money for his bail.

King's first lawyer, a civil attorney, was able to get his bail reduced to \$500,000. Once King was released, he worked tirelessly to find a criminal attorney.

"It was humbling," said King. "I went around begging lawyers to take my case, telling them, 'Here are the facts, I'm innocent but I can't afford to pay you.' My mother would [tell] me, 'Someone is going to bless us.'"

King eventually found attorney Warren Harris, and the two worked closely together to build King's defense.

As the highly publicized trial got under way in 2006, some said the football players were going to get



Top right: Bill Petros/The Current; rest, courtesy of James King

University of the District of Columbia law school grad James King became interested in justice after his football career was derailed by a wrongful murder charge. After graduating this year, he scored a coveted position with the city's public defender's office.

away with murder. One juror was dismissed for saying outside of court that King was going to get "25 years to life." But when the prosecutors' witnesses testified that King tried to break up the fight, the prosecutors offered King a plea deal.

"I was worried about the jury and I didn't know if I was getting a fair trial," King said. "People always say there is no way they would go to jail for something they didn't do, but then reality sinks in. I knew I was innocent, but I also knew I could go to jail for the rest of my life for something I didn't do, so when we got the letters offering a plea deal, it was tempting."

A few days into the trial, prosecutors decided to reduce the second-degree murder charge to misdemeanor attempted assault. After considering the offer, King would agree, as long as he could plead "no contest" rather than "guilty." Prosecutors approved the deal, and agreed that King would not have to serve time in jail. But at the last minute, the judge rejected part of the plea deal and sentenced King to six months in jail.

One of the first people allowed to visit King was Kurt Fiegel, a parole officer assigned to write King's pre-sentencing report.

"He told me that he thought I got a bum rap, knowing all the facts of the case, and he apologized to me on behalf of the city," said King.

Then Fiegel did something unusual. He gave King an LSAT book and said, "I watched you during the whole trial and you looked like a lawyer up there. I see something special in you — don't let this be your last stand."

A few months after King was released, he took a Greyhound bus from Detroit to Chicago to attend a law school forum. There, he met Dean Vivian Canty from the University of the District of Columbia David A. Clarke School of Law.

"My feet were tired, I was sweating and my suit was wrinkled," said King. "But we had a regular conversation, and when I met her again a year later, she remembered me. I thought, I'm going to apply to UDC and if the people there are anything like her,

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GRAD: From jail to jurisprudence

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I'm going to go there."

King was accepted to several law schools, and in the fall of 2009, he started his first year in D.C. And King said the people there were just as welcoming as Cauty.

Back on that first day, when he was still carrying around two dictionaries, one faculty member approached King and asked if he had purchased his civil procedures textbook. King hadn't yet — he said his jaw nearly hit the ground when he saw the \$200 price tag — so the professor gave him his copy.

Another professor, Judge William Pryor, who teaches criminal law, reassured King about his decision to study law.

"Initially I had fears about how I would perform in law school, if people would judge me because of my past, if I would have to fight stereotypes," King said. "Judge Pryor told me as long as I work hard and do the right things, this would work out for me, so that's the attitude I took."

Three years later, King emerged as one of the law school's most talented students.

He was an associate editor on the law review, president of the student bar association, and served as a teacher's assistant and tutor to fellow law students. In his clinical work, a required part of the curriculum, King worked with immigrants and traveled to Mississippi to work with survivors of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill.

He was also part of the school's

2011 mock trial team, which placed third in a regional competition and ninth in the nation.

"James has incredible raw, natural talent as a trial lawyer," said professor Andrew Ferguson, who teaches advanced criminal law classes and helps advise the mock trial team. "He has charisma, confidence and intelligence. Watching James perform his opening and closing arguments, I thought he could step into a courtroom right now and be successful — yet he's so humble about it and he realizes he's still learning."

Last summer, King won a prestigious internship at the Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia, considered one of the best public defender's offices in the country, where he worked alongside law students from schools such as Harvard, Georgetown and Stanford.

"It was very powerful for me to be able to do what I always wanted to do — to help people with legal problems who can't afford an attorney," said King. "The things that have happened to me help me relate to my clients. I can imagine if I was placed in their situation — what if I didn't have a mom or siblings who were as supportive as they were, who knows where I would be."

At the public defender's office, he was given a particularly challenging client that even staff attorneys had trouble handling.

"Nobody could understand him because he spoke with prison jargon, so his lawyers kept telling him not to speak," said King. "But I knew what he was saying, and at the end of the day, he just wanted to be treated as a



Courtesy of James King

Before he was accused of second-degree murder, recent UDC law grad James King was a football star at Central Michigan University.

human being. In court, I stepped aside and let him say his piece — he just wanted to be heard; everybody deserves that."

At the end of King's internship, he beat out 89 fellow law students, most from tier-one schools, to get the one job offer the office extended.

"James reaches out into the hearts of those around them and he takes them where they need to go to make sure justice happens," said Dean Shelley Broderick. "I say this because I've never received a call from PDS — the best in the nation and one of the most competitive places to get a job — to tell me how spectacular one of my students is, and they said that about James."

King received numerous awards and competitive scholarships throughout his time in law school, and was asked to speak at the graduation ceremony this spring.

His speech focused on the strength of the student body.

"A lot of people come to UDC

hoping to do well in their first year so that they can transfer to a tier-one school," King said. "I thought about doing that, too," but he stayed because of his fellow students, he said.

"We're like a family — we looked out for each other and pulled for one another — and we all graduated together. One of the best decisions of my life was to stay at UDC. I not only learned from everyone but I couldn't have been around a better group of people."

King is now studying for the D.C. bar exam, eager to begin his "dream job" at the public defender's office.

"A big part of the reason I'm where I am today is because of the help I've received from others," said King. "At every stage of my life where I've been knocked down, there were people there to support and help me. My whole thing is to give back — the most vindicating thing would be to help someone who is innocent of a crime to go home."

HARDWARE: Entrepreneur to open 'express' store in Woodley Park

From Page 1

She also intends to offer several types of services she has in her larger stores, like tool rental, paint matching, and key and glass cutting.

"Neighborhood groups in Woodley Park have been telling us for years that they wanted a hardware store," said Schaefer. "I didn't think an 8,000-square-foot store would be smart for this area, but I think the express store could work really well here."

Schaefer said if the store doesn't have a particular product in stock in the morning, it's likely she can track it down at one of her other shops and have it in Woodley Park by the time the customer returns in the evening. Two of her four other stores in the District are less than two miles from the Woodley Park location. She hopes the store's location, less than a block from the Woodley Park Metro station, will be convenient for customers.

The hardware store owner credits the growth of her business during the economic recession, in the shadow of big-box stores, to "filling a need" in the communities she serves.

"People who live in cities want to be able to walk to stores to get what they need," said Schaefer. "They want convenience, friendly service and a good selection."

A shopper in Schaefer's Mount Vernon Triangle store who identified himself as a "regular customer" said he comes to the store because it's convenient to his office, and added, "I'd rather give my business to a smaller entity than a larger, big-box chain."

"Plus, the customer service is superior in this



Bill Petros/The Current

The new location in Woodley Park will be Gina Schaefer's eighth hardware store.

store," he said.

It turns out larger big-box stores might not carry a significantly higher number of products. A Home Depot spokesperson said the company's average store carries about 40,000 different products, though customers can special order products from among 250,000 items. Ace's special order catalogue lists more than 65,000 items, according to its website.

Schaefer said what many people might not know is that Ace Hardware, founded in 1924, is a cooperative. That means independent shop owners combine their buying power with other owners to purchase goods together. Still, individual retailers have the authority to decide which products to carry — there's no mandate from headquarters.

"A store could be as fun or as utilitarian as an owner might want," said Schaefer.

While Schaefer said she likes to vary her product lines with the "different flavors of the seasons," she always makes sure to stock one of the

most frequently requested items: blender gaskets.

As a national organization, Ace also provides training and support to owners and their staff to help a store become and stay successful.

The Ace ownership model appears to be working in the District. Anne Stom opened a store in Petworth this past February. Her location at 1240 Upshur St., near Georgia Avenue, is "exceeding expectations," Stom said.

She said it has been humbling to see that almost every day, people of all ages, from those who just moved into the neighborhood to long-time residents, tell her or her staff that they're grateful the hardware store is there.

Stom's staff members give informal lessons on everything from plumbing to electrical work, a bike repair group meets at the store weekly, and she soon plans to offer "Tool Time With Annie" classes to the community.

Both Ace owners made a point to hire locally, and both have hired staff from the nonprofit Jubilee Jobs, where Schaefer is a member of the corporate advisory board. At the Woodley Park location, Schaefer hopes to hire 14 new staff members, depending on the store's sales.

Schaefer and her husband, Marc Friedman, opened their first Ace Hardware store in 2003 in Logan Circle, and now they have stores in Glover Park, Tenleytown and Mount Vernon Triangle. In Maryland, they have two stores in Baltimore — soon to be three — and one in Takoma Park. The couple plans to open the Woodley Park store in the coming months. Schaefer said more stores could be on the horizon, adding, "Ten would be a nice round number."