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Carle Place Firm Leading Way On Civil-Rights Center

ONE DAY in the not too distant future, the Hofstra University School of Law will have a center for the study of civil-rights laws.

The federal courts are burgeoning with allegations of civil-rights violations, and it has become a busy area of law, just as active as criminal law or divorce and almost as busy as bankruptcy. And the practice of civil-rights law has become quite specialized.

The law is changing constantly because of the increasing number of cases and Supreme Court rulings, rejecting earlier interpretations involving employment and discrimination law.

Officials at the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission said there is an increase in cases involving the most vulnerable women in the workplace: those filling blue-collar and factory jobs, especially immigrants.

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The firm recently settled a landmark civil-rights case for \$19 million from Astoria Federal Savings Bank on behalf of Queens residents, most of them Asian. In the past 18 months, the firm settled approximately 2,000 age, race and discrimination cases, including 600 cases involving women discriminated against in employment and sex discrimination cases, according to the firm.

Two of the lead partners in the firm, Lenard Leeds and Jeffrey K. Brown, are Hofstra Law School alumni. They say they want to give something back to the university and the community, so they plan to lead the efforts to get the center built.

Last month, Hofstra dedicated an atrium on campus that was built in 1990 in the name of the firm because of its continued interest in the school.

The dean of the law school, Stuart Rabinowitz, said at the dedication that the center would encourage law students to go into civil-rights law. "I'm very excited about it," he said. University officials are reviewing a proposal for such a center.

Leeds said his firm is planning fund raisers for the proposed center.

His firm has been involved in several unusual civil-rights cases. In one case last year, the firm represented a former Nassau County police officer who accused the Nassau County Police Department and two of its supervisors of harassing him because he is gay.

A federal jury of five women and five men agreed with the former police officer, James M. Quinn, and awarded him \$250,000 in compensation for emotional distress, \$60,000 for loss of termination pay and \$70,000 in punitive damages.

The case broke legal ground when U.S. District Court Judge Arthur Spatt refused a request by Nassau County to dismiss the case and designated gays who work in government as a protected class under federal anti-discrimination law.

Two years ago, an Indian immigrant, represented by the Leeds firm, was awarded \$522,000 in a racial discrimination suit against a Bethpage-based auto insurance company. Rajagopala Raghavendra charged that a supervisor repeatedly singled him out for harsh treatment because of his dark skin and cultural background and then wrongfully fired him.

In 1991, the firm won a \$1.5-million award for a Wyandanch man who claimed that he was demoted and then fired by an insurance company because he is black. The jury found that he had been a victim of racial discrimination.

Leeds is currently working on a class-action suit involving more than 300 current and former employees of Nextel Communications Inc. involving complaints of racial and sexual discrimination at the company in various states.

Leeds said the proposed civil-rights center at Hofstra would have a curriculum relating to First Amendment protections and discrimination law covering age, race and sex.

"And we want to set up a neighborhood law office, which would offer free legal services for people who have civil-rights cases but really can't afford to hire lawyers, and also we want to set up some kind of alternative dispute process," Leeds said.

"We find, especially on Long Island, that in many of the large companies, women are underrepresented in management," he added. "That's a real problem that this center would confront and help corporations change that on Long Island and elsewhere."

"I've always believed that the law was not always black or white, but a lot of gray, and that a strong advocate could really make a difference [for] his client," Leeds said. "I think this practice is built upon that. We have always tried to stretch the law or take advantage of the flexibility in the law to fight for our clients."