

Conn. Lawyer Co-Authors Screenplay for New Thurgood Marshall Movie

Movie to focus on 1940s trial involving Greenwich case

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Thurgood Marshall

When a friend mentioned how a long-ago criminal trial from Connecticut would make for a good movie, attorney Michael Koskoff was intrigued.

The case involved Greenwich socialite Eleanor Strubing, who was found wandering near a reservoir in December 1940. She accused her newly hired African-American chauffeur, Joseph Spell, of kidnapping and raping her. The case and Spell's ensuing trial prompted a media frenzy, which Koskoff compared to the attention garnered by the O.J. Simpson murder trial.

Thurgood Marshall, who would later become the first African-American appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court, was 32 years old when he came to Bridgeport to join another attorney, Samuel Friedman, who was Jewish, in defending Spell.

"This was a story of two courageous lawyers battling against racism at a time when there was enormous pressure, racism and anti-Semitism," said Koskoff, a name partner in the Bridgeport plaintiffs' firm of Koskoff Koskoff & Bieder. "I felt it was a great story. These are people who risked their lives to represent someone."

Koskoff wrote a screenplay based on the case with help from his son, Jacob, an established screenwriter whose credits include a new film version of Shakespeare's "Macbeth," starring Michael Fassbender. Their work is about to be made into a major motion picture called "Marshall."

"People can be fond of lawyer bashing," Koskoff said. "What I wanted to demonstrate is the great public value lawyers bring to society. I wanted to show the heroism of lawyers who are facing high odds and personal dangers in an attempt to make the jury system work."

Koskoff said he personally has been threatened for his work as an attorney, and he noted how courageous it was for Friedman and Marshall to do their job representing Spell in the pre-World War II era. The film will focus on Marshall's early career. Marshall launched the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund and also argued the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* case, which led the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954 to rule that segregated schools were unconstitutional.

Koskoff said it was his friend, Jacob "Jack" Zeldes, a Bridgeport attorney who passed away in 2013, who brought the Spell case to his attention. Zeldes knew that Koskoff's son and daughter, Sarah, an actress and writer, are involved in the film industry, and Zeldes suggested that the Spell trial would make a great movie. At the time, Koskoff's children were busy with other projects, so he decided to write the screenplay himself.

"Thurgood Marshall is responsible for so many historic changes, yet to many he isn't well known," Koskoff said. "I felt this was important for Connecticut history for this story to be told. I thought it spoke volumes about the climate of racism in our society both then and now."

According to Koskoff, the publicity surrounding the Spell trial and resulting fear led to people firing their black employees.

About seven years ago, Koskoff started writing the screenplay, a project which involved an enormous amount of research. He tracked down and read several newspaper articles, though he said there were no trial transcripts for him to draw on. He contacted relatives of Friedman and Marshall for insight into the men's characters.

Koskoff shared his screenplay with Friedman's daughter, Lauren, who supported the project and showed the screenplay to Paula Wagner, who is producing the film. Wagner has produced such blockbuster movies as "Mission: Impossible" and "The Others."

"[Paula] loved it, but said it needed work, on the characters and plot, and that is when my son Jacob came to the rescue," Koskoff said. "We worked on it together, and he developed the characters and plot more fully. It was a collaboration a parent dreams of."

Wagner then shared the screenplay with Reginald Hudlin, the producer of "Django Unchained." Hudlin has also directed films such as "House Party" and "Boomerang," and for two years has been the executive producer of the NAACP Image Awards.

"He said Thurgood Marshall was one of his heroes his whole life, and he agreed to direct the film," Koskoff said. "This project has been a labor of love for the past seven years and we are confident that Reggie will bring our screenplay to life, artfully and with the greatest skill and insight."

Wagner said of the project, "It's a very dramatic courtroom drama, set in Connecticut, with strong insights into what Thurgood Marshall later became."

Koskoff said his legal background helped him with writing the screenplay. He defended the Black Panthers in criminal trials in the early 1970s, and successfully fought for black police and fire personnel previously excluded from jobs in Bridgeport and New Haven. "In my early career, I did a lot of civil rights and criminal cases," Koskoff said. "I know the dynamics that take place in a high-profile trial."

"My experience as a trial lawyer for 50 years was invaluable in bringing authenticity to the courtroom [scenes]," Koskoff said. "So often, what you see in the movies isn't realistic. I think my greatest contribution was in bringing realism."

According to Koskoff, the movie's theme of racial persecution and the search for justice "resonates more than ever today."

The movie's cast is being assembled. It was recently announced that actor Chadwick Boseman, who played Jackie Robinson in "42," will portray Marshall. "We got a great actor," Koskoff said, of Boseman's selection. "He is excited about the part and we are thrilled to have him."

The bulk of filming is expected to take place this spring.

Koskoff, 73, hopes to inspire others to follow a creative passion, even later in life. Koskoff noted the writer of the screenplay behind the movie "The King's Speech" was also in his 70s. "I thought if he can do it, then I can do it," Koskoff said. •