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## How Bill Hair '90 Beat the Odds

UB Law Forum

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# How Bill Hair '90 Beat the Odds

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*"I believe that I haven't reached my full potential but I know as a lawyer I can do a lot more. Unlike most people who have made honorable accomplishments, I have not forgotten my past."*

*From Bill Hair's application essay to UB Law School*

**I**t never should have happened, Bill Hair admits. A person with his history never should have made it through high school, much less college and law school. "I don't think anyone thought I would get as far as I've gotten," he says. "According to the statistics, I should either be dead or in prison by now."

Yet here he is at age 28: William Hair Jr., Esq. He works as an attorney trainee with New York City's Commission on Human Rights, handling discrimination cases, doing some mediation and conciliation, acting as the people's advocate at hearings. In August, *Ebony* magazine cited him as a role model and future leader, one of only 50 young

blacks across the country. All in all, things are just about perfect.

It never should have happened.

Bill Hair grew up in Jamaica, N.Y. He was born without a right hand. When he was 3 years old, his father — an alcoholic, a former prizefighter — came home one day and murdered his mother.

For young Bill, that was only the beginning. His grandmother took him and his brothers into her home, but the financial strain was just too much for her. The boys were separated and farmed out to a succession of foster homes, about which Hair has little good to say. "Extortionary" is the word he uses. "They only did it for the money."

*Bill Hair '90 at his office.*

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*"Bill is a warm and sensitive person who is well-liked and able to work with people from all walks of life. In spite of — or perhaps because of — the personal tragedies he has experienced, he has developed a keen sense of humor which serves him well."*

*Clifford D. Clark,  
President,  
SUNY at Binghamton*

**B**ill was a troublemaker in the public schools. In retrospect, he admits it cheerfully. But it was no joyride back then. He had nightmares stemming from his childhood trauma. And his emotional and behavior problems just snowballed. He disrupted classes repeatedly. His teachers didn't know what to do with him.

He was thrown out of five schools.

Then came his last-ditch chance to redeem his life. It arrived when he was 13 years old, in the form of an ultimatum from a social worker. Either they would give up on him entirely, she said, or he'd have to go to the Summit School, a private, intensive school in Forest Hills for emotionally disturbed and learning-disabled children.

He chose the school, and would spend the next six years there. Hair still keeps his class portrait from that first year at Summit; he's the one on the right, with the cocky don't-touch look on his face. He had an attitude.

But something clicked while he was at the school, and Hair made the decision to go all-out to succeed. "I knew it was time to take life more seriously," he says. He also got a job as an usher in a Forest Hills movie theater — and a taste of the good life in that idyllic community. He knew he wanted more.



**Bill Hair '90**

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*"William will be an excellent attorney. He will use his position to assist minority people. He will be an inspiration to disadvantaged children, but in my opinion he will be an inspiration to us all."*

*Professor Kevin Wright,  
SUNY at Binghamton*

**S**o Hair plowed his way through Summit School, where there are two teachers for every dozen students, and took the GED examination. He failed. So he took it again and again and again, and on the fifth attempt, he passed.

He applied to John Jay College of Criminal Justice and spent a year there, studying to be a probation officer. But it wasn't enough, and he knew he needed to get out of New York City. So he applied to SUNY at Binghamton and was accepted.

The academics were tougher than anything he had experienced, but he stuck it out. He did more than that — he worked his tail off. He worked as a

resident assistant in a campus dormitory. He was an orientation assistant for incoming students. He served on the University Judicial Board, hearing charges of university rule violations.

And when he graduated in December 1985, he applied to UB Law School. While here, he helped to found Club 504, a law student organization that advances the needs of disabled students.

"Part of my problem emotionally," Hair says, "is when I lock onto something, it's almost like a heat-guided missile. It's good when I can apply it to problems and goals, but when I have a problem and can't let go of it, that's the downside."

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*"Though your ship may sink,  
you'll get across  
Let dedication be your only  
helmsman  
It will show you the way."*

Bill Hair found that poem in *Time* magazine, and it has become the theme he lives by.

"I believe if you're a nice person and want to help people, people will want to help you. The most important thing is not to betray that trust. When people give you a helping hand, you never forget it.

"I can't say enough about the support I got at the Law School. Dean Alan Carrel was a tremendous help, and especially Professor Nils Olsen — he has fought for me, believed in me, given me a lot of assistance and guidance. I wouldn't have gotten out of there without him.

"I guess God has a place where he wants me to be, and he's doing everything to get me there.

"School is one thing. You've got to study hard and get good grades so you can get that job. But once you've got the job, nobody's going to ask you too much about what you did in school. They want to know, can you do the work?"

He's finding out now. William Hair Jr., Esq. ■