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RON DZWONKOWSKI

Mom's job well done

Messages of love, work, education pushed Leo Bowman to success

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 FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

After Leo Bowman learned that he had been elevated from his District Court judgeship in Pontiac to become the first African-American male to serve as a judge of Oakland County Circuit Court, he disappeared for a while, confounding many well-wishers.

But Bowman just had to go tell his mother. So as the congratulatory messages piled up in Bowman's chambers on that day in January, the judge was at Perry Mount Park Cemetery in Pontiac, visiting the grave of Ida Mae Bowman, who died in 1999 at age 78.

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"She would always say that I could do anything, and that if I just went to school and educated myself, that I could be anything I wanted to be," Bowman recalled. "She was my constant positive reinforcement. And I really believed I could do anything that I wanted to do if I was willing to work hard enough.

"With what I get to see now, hearing cases in Family Court, I am reminded all the time how truly blessed I was. ... She was a single mom with six children, but she got the basics right. We had a safe, supportive environment, she put food on the table, she got up every day and went to work. She gave her children an example of what it was to be a caring, responsible, moral, law-abiding adult. That's what I grew up seeing. ... I've had kids from two-parent families in the court and none of this basic stuff is going on in their lives."

There wasn't money for fancy vacations or costly extracurriculars in the Bowman household. But you can't put a price on the love and support Ida Mae delivered daily to her family, or the lessons they received that would shape their adult lives. Giving great gifts doesn't always involve money. And the only gift most moms want back is to know that their children are well and happy. Oh, and as the years go by, they'll gladly take back a little of all that time they spent on you when you depended on them so much, even if it can only be a graveside conversation.

Judge Bowman, 52, whose father died when he was a baby, reflected on his mother's influence in a telephone interview Thursday from South Africa, where he is on a teaching and listening tour with Oakland University political science professor Vincent Khapoya. Bowman is an OU grad, which would have been achievement enough considering his rocky start in the public schools of his native Pontiac.

The man who would become a judge initially skipped so many classes in high school that by the end of 10th grade he had one half-credit – for driver's education.

None of his older siblings had graduated from high school, and Bowman wasn't sure he wanted to.

"I had to make a decision. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I knew I didn't want to go into GM," he said, referring to Pontiac's major employer.

And there was his mother, a hospital cook who quit school in ninth grade

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(Family photo)

Circuit judge-to-be Leo Bowman at his 1976 graduation from Oakland University, with his mother, Ida Mae Bowman.

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