

the ALUMNI Profile

The Legislative Chamber of the Omaha-Douglas County Civic Center is theater: Its ranks of green-plush auditorium seats slope downward along carpeted aisles toward the focal point of the room, the raised desk at which the lawmakers sit facing the audience.

The lighting is theatrical, too, with Klieg-like fixtures aimed at the arced wooden bench, highlighting the features of the officials in a semi-darkened arena.

The supporting cast of city clerks and bureaucrats sits either at the side or the back of the "set," while a seemingly endless throng of citizens streams up to a rostrum giving script to this real-life drama with their pleadings and excuses; venting their frustrations over wrongs, both real and perceived.

In the era of public access television, the work of the Omaha City Council can be seen in every cable home, not just "live" but in repeated broadcasts. The members of the City Council become to their groupies a local version of the celebrities that C-SPAN has made of the familiar faces in Congress.

The plot of this civic theater is very much the same, week after week: applications for liquor licenses; appeals from administrative decisions; condemnations of buildings; requests for zoning.

The cast of leading players changes at the public will, however. In the spring of 1993, Omaha City Council member and Creighton Law alum Lee Terry, '87, was joined by Brenda Warren Council, '77. Council was elected to fill the vacancy in the district represented by another Creighton Law alum, Fred Conley, '80, who had decided not to seek re-election.

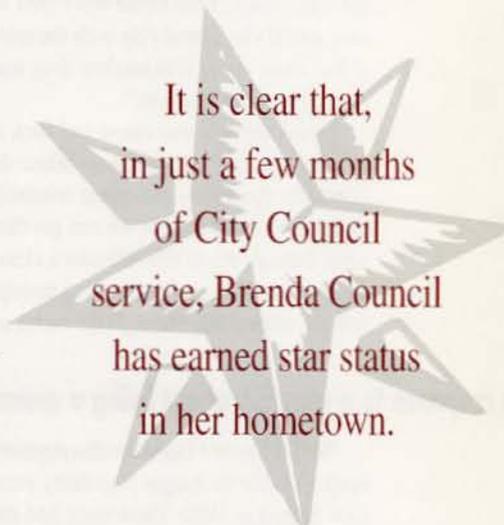
It is clear that, in just a few months of City Council service, Brenda Council has earned star status in her hometown.

Council is the first African-American woman to serve on the Omaha City Council. But this is not her first tour of duty in public office. Upon election to city government, she left an eleven-year tenure as a member of the Omaha Board of Education (where, among other offices,

she had served as president).

Government service is an avocation for Council. Her "real job" is as Senior Counsel for the Union Pacific Railroad Co. She's been working for the railroad since 1980, when she left the National Labor Relations Board, having served as a field attorney since the year of her graduation from Creighton.

The City Council's public meetings include moments of nail-biting excitement and political tension, such as the collision between Mayor P.J. Morgan and the lawmakers over adoption of a local gun-control ordinance. Most of the time, however, the meetings require the patience of Job and—for Council members intent on doing a thorough job—the eyes of a hawk.



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Consider: A typical meeting may have sixty or more items on the agenda, most of them dealing with whether to tear down an already collapsing building, or whether a tavern may have an outdoor "beer garden," or whether the city's elaborate maze of zoning regulations should be waived for a project which will "create jobs." There are reams and reams of paper placed before City Council members by the staff of City Clerk Mary Galligan Cornett, who is charged with reading the language of new ordinances and recording the vote by calling the roll.

Brenda Council reads—studies—all of the paper work. During a hearing on an application for a liquor license recently,

she leaned forward, looking more intently at the forms in front of her, paused, and, with her eyes peering over the top of her horn-rimmed glasses, asked the applicant if the signature on one page was the same as that ten or twelve pages deeper into the pile of paper.

They were different; the applicant struggled with an explanation, knowing that his oversight had been spotted.

Some may wonder: Is this just the focus, the high energy level of a newcomer to city government? Will it wear off as she becomes comfortable on the job?

Not according to people who have known Brenda Council and worked with her for many years.

At the Union Pacific her specialty is labor law, that unique and arcane breed of labor law which governs relations between the rail carriers and their employees. But she has also been involved in legal business relating to the vast real estate holdings and acquisitions of the transportation company.

Larry Wzorek, another Senior Counsel at U.P. who joined the company following stints in the Army and at a huge Washington, D.C. law firm, says that Council "pulls great weight" for the company. Wzorek characterized Council as a truly diligent, hard-working lawyer who is respected throughout the Union Pacific.

"What I like about her style of lawyering is the fact that she understands the nuances of complex issues. She's not just 'right' on the law, but she is pragmatic and can grasp the politics of a problem," Wzorek, a Georgetown lawyer who did his undergraduate work at Creighton, stressed.

One might imagine that a politically-active lawyer for a large corporation could be tempted to wink at on-the-job responsibilities and focus on the world of government. Not so with his colleague, Wzorek adds. "She has always done her share of her work and has been called on to undertake other assignments as well.

"For example, she has a wonderful outlook on the issue of diversity within the company. I can't tell you how many task forces she has served on to keep U.P. ahead of the curve in human relations issues," Wzorek notes.

Brenda Council began her life not far

the Law School. Three years later she was on her way to Kansas City and a job with the National Labor Relations Board, where she honed her interest in labor relations.

When Brenda Council came home to work for the Union Pacific, she was the first African-American attorney the company hired.

Within just two years, she embarked on her political career. She ran for—and was elected to—the Omaha School Board.

When it became apparent that Fred Conley—who had been the first African-American elected to the City Council—would not run for another term, Council seized the chance for a new opportunity to get involved in promoting business development in the area where she was born.

She told campaign audiences that economic development goes hand-in-hand with human development. More jobs, better housing,

and a consistent level of city services were all focuses of her campaign. Last May, Brenda Council left the Board of Education to become a City Council member.

She was an advocate for youth in the schools position, and her new job with the Omaha City Council still casts her in that role from time to time. At a recent speech to an American Government class at South High School, Council addressed the problem of youth violence, an issue she understands has an impact on the quality of education a child receives and on the quality of life a community may enjoy.



from the downtown Omaha homes of City Hall, the Union Pacific Railroad, and Creighton Law School. As a child on the North Side attending Lothrop Elementary School—at 22nd and Lothrop Streets—Council thought she wanted to be a school teacher. Later she attended Horace Mann Junior High School and Central High, still dreaming of becoming a teacher like those mentors she so admired.

She did go on to the University of Nebraska at Lincoln to earn a degree in education in just three years. But the fall following her graduation from college in the summer of 1974, she was enrolled at

She told the sophomores, "I think we commit folly if we think the city is solely responsible for addressing the issue of youth violence.

"We can't look to one particular avenue for the solution to this problem," she stated.

You have to begin with basics, Council explained. The first step is to ask, "Why is it that some youths find it necessary to carry guns and knives and to use guns and knives to solve problems?"

She quickly added that some young people often respond that they have nothing to do. Council then said that lack of employment also creates problems, "but it doesn't explain why nine-year-olds threaten each other with guns."

For Council, a large part of the solution may lie with the young people themselves. She told this student group that teen-agers do not realize the enormous influence they have over one another when they attack or condone certain behavior.

And what part do the adults play? Council said that they can be role models. "They can show children how to resolve conflicts in a responsible manner," she explained.

On the day of her visit with the South High students, the City Council was still deliberating a gun-control ordinance which has since passed.

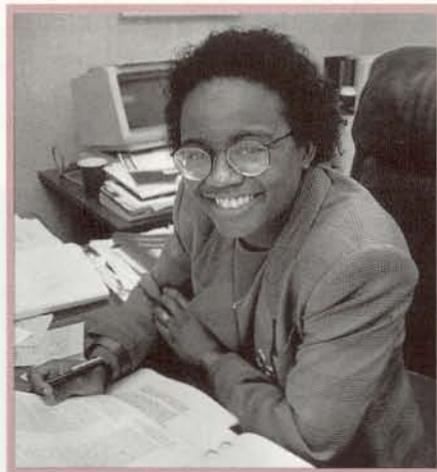
It was evident that Brenda Council was dipping into the same combination of intelligence, pragmatism, and consensus-building that her colleague Larry Wzorek said distinguished her job performance at the U.P., for she told the sophomores, "This ordinance in and of itself cannot solve the problem, but it can be one dimension in a multidimensional solution."

She then ticked off other dimensions of the solution: employment, recreation, and mechanisms to resolve family crises.

On another occasion in November, Council was a member of a panel of young government officials appearing before Leadership Omaha, a program sponsored by the Greater Omaha

Chamber of Commerce for business and professional people in the early stages of their careers. The other officials on panel were State Senator Brad Ashford—who earned his J.D. at Creighton the spring before Council began her first year—and Steve McCollister, a three-term member of the Douglas County Board.

The question being discussed was: "What are the guiding principles or traits



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one must have to be an honest politician?"

Someone said, "That's easy. Courage and the skill to educate."

Council jumped into the open, informal give-and-take of the discussion, quickly agreeing. "I've had to make thousands of decisions in public office. It's just not possible to wring your hands over them. You've got to have the courage of your convictions.

"That comes from spending long and sometimes tedious hours finding all the facts and listening to everyone who wants to have a say," she added.

"But you also have to spend a lot of patient hours explaining what government does and why the best result may not be

what a given constituent wants right at that minute."

She later noted that you can't let the fact that "only a handful of people come to a meeting, or that you must patiently explain the same point a dozen times a day get you down."

It is evident when anyone enters the Legislative Chamber during an Omaha City Council meeting that Brenda Council has spent long and tedious hours studying every item on the agenda.

It is also evident, if one were to follow her around any week of the year, that she has one other trait which is the envy of all her peers: boundless, exuberant energy.

She casually mentioned to the Leadership Omaha class the breakfast, dinner, and evening meetings she had attended that week alone, from neighborhood improvement groups, to school ceremonies, to service clubs.

One observer noted that everyone in each of those groups would go away thinking that their interests were the only thing important to the intense, youthful City Council member.

Brenda Council—corporate attorney, past president of the Omaha Board of Education, member of the City Council—chooses to live on Omaha's North Side, to live in the same neighborhood where she grew up. She and her husband, Otha, a professional florist, and his son, share a condominium within the shadow of Lothrop School.

Some observers might say that Brenda Council chooses to live in her old neighborhood because it is comfortable, or because it is close to U.P. headquarters or the city-county building just downtown.

In truth, at home, in her old neighborhood, this talented attorney turned lawmaker lives near her roots where, consciously or not, she serves as a role model to hundreds of young kids who themselves have a dream about making a success of their lives and giving something back to their community.

*by Richard E. Shugrue
Professor of Law*