

# Lawsuit tips Voting Rights Act on head

## Special to Sentinel-Voice

Ike Brown is a legend in Mississippi politics — a fast-talking operative — both loved and hated for his ability to turn out Black voters and get his candidates into office.

That success has also landed him at the heart of a federal lawsuit that's about to turn the Voting Rights Act on its end.

For the first time, the U.S. Justice Department is using the 1965 law to allege racial discrimination against Whites.

Brown, head of the Democratic Party in

Mississippi's rural Noxubee County, is accused of waging a campaign to defeat White voters and candidates with tactics including intimidation and coercion.

Also named in the lawsuit, is Circuit Clerk Carl Mickens, who has agreed to refrain from rejecting White voters' absentee ballots considered defective while accepting similar ballots from Black voters.

Brown shakes off the allegations.

"They've been trying to target me for years, the attorney general and all them, because we're so successful,"

the 52-year-old said. "Hey, if you're a failure, nobody will mess with you. But we're successful in east Mississippi."

The Justice Department complaint says Brown and those working with him "participated in numerous racial appeals during primary and general campaigns and have criticized Black citizens for supporting White candidates and for forming biracial, political coalitions with White candidates."

Noxubee County, a rural

area along the Alabama line named for a Choctaw word meaning "stinking water", has a population of 12,500 — 69 percent Black and 30 percent White.

Whites once dominated county politics here, but now, only one White person holds countywide office, and he said Brown tried to recruit an out-of-county Black candidate to run against him three years ago.

The federal case against Brown, scheduled for trial this fall, represents a change

in direction in the use of the Voting Rights Act, said Jon Greenbaum, director of the voting rights project for the Washington-based Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.

The law was written to protect racial minorities in the 1960s when Mississippi and other Southern states strictly enforced segregation.

"The main concern we have in the civil rights community isn't necessarily that that [Department of Justice] brought this case,"

Greenbaum said. "It's that the department is not bringing meritorious cases on behalf of African-American and Native American voters."

Justice Department records show the department's last voting-rights case alleging discrimination against Black voters was filed in 2001. Since then, six cases have been brought on behalf of voters of Hispanic or Asian descent in five states — plus the case involving (See Suit, Page 14)

## Eli Lilly accused of race harassment

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — A racial discrimination lawsuit alleges Eli Lilly & Co. paid Black employees less than their White peers, passed them over for promotions and subjected them to harassment such as epithets.

The lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court also claims a Lilly human resources staffer told a complaining female employee that her managers on the manufacturing side considered her previous corporate supervisors to be too accepting of Blacks and that they were no longer in a position to address her concerns.

"It's like the plantation, unfortunately, at the manufacturing site. It's blatant discrimination," Cassandra Welch said after the lawsuit was filed. Lilly fired her in mid-2004 for allegedly falsifying e-mails in an unrelated financial dispute with another employee of the Indianapolis-based drug company.

Welch, two other former employees and a current one are named as plaintiffs in the complaint, which seeks class-action status on behalf of more than 1,000 Black employees whom attorneys said might have faced the same kinds of discrimination since August 2003. It seeks unspecified damages, lost compensation and an order enjoining Lilly against future discrimination.

Each of the four plaintiffs also have complaints pending with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the lawsuit said.

Lilly spokeswoman Carla Cox said the company was withholding comment on the specific allegations as offi-

cial had not yet reviewed the lawsuit.

"It's certainly part of our company fabric to treat people fairly and with respect," Cox said.

More than 20 present and former Lilly employees have contacted the plaintiffs' lawyers, Joshua and David Rose of Washington, D.C., about possible representation in the case, Joshua Rose said.

"Lilly managers tend to groom White employees for promotion and bonuses more effectively, more rapidly and more often than their African-American peers," the attorneys, who specialize in employment law, said in a written statement.

Welch, 45, now a northern Virginia-based business consultant, said she began at Lilly in 1992 as a production worker earning an hourly wage, transferred to finance and, after obtaining her bachelor's degree in accounting and information technology, was promoted to a salaried position in 2000.

The lawsuit alleges she was paid at a grade lower than her responsibilities merited and was part of a team whose White male members received bonuses, merit awards and promotions that were denied to her.

"I have to say the executives and Lilly, in terms of (diversity) strategy and policy, has one of the best in the industry," Welch said in a telephone interview. However, she said managers only went through the motions with those policies. "A policy only is as good as it's implemented. It was more of a check-the-box exercise."

(See Eli, Page 6)

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