

Civil rights lawyer takes on Calif. shooting case

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — Suing police officers is good business for civil rights lawyer John Burris.

Over the past 30 years, the former prosecutor has earned millions of dollars for handling hundreds of police brutality suits, other racially charged cases and high-profile lawsuits.

Burris, 63, helped win a \$3.8 million jury verdict for Rodney King over a videotaped beating in 1991 at the hands of Los Angeles police. He defended basketball star Latrell Sprewell against reckless driving charges in 1998. And he obtained a \$42,000 settlement for the late rapper Tupac Shakur in a 1991 brutality suit against the Oakland police.

So it came as little surprise in legal circles that Burris was hired by the family of Oscar Grant, the 22-year-old Black man gunned down by a White transit police officer as he lay face down on a Bay Area Rapid Transit platform here on New Year's Day.

Prosecutors allege that Grant was restrained and about to be handcuffed when BART officer Johannes Mehserle shot him once in the back. Murder charges have been filed against Mehserle; Burris has filed a \$25 million claim on behalf of Grant's family.

Burris said Grant's death is one of the two most unsettling cases he has handled since graduating from the University of California, Berkeley's law school in 1976. The other is the lawsuit he filed for the family of Mack "Jody" Woodfox, who was fatally shot in the back while fleeing Oakland police after a traffic stop in July.

"It's the shooting in the back that causes people to go nuts," Burris said of the sometimes-violent demonstrations here over Grant's death. "That's as bad as it gets."

Burris' portfolio and his visibility as a television commentator have helped forge his reputation as an aggressive advocate for Northern California's Black community.

Burris figures he takes about 50 police brutality cases a year. Many are relatively small, such as ex-convicts getting teeth knocked out by police or Black women accusing officers of conducting illegal strip searches.

But in 2006, he helped secure \$1.3 million in settlements from the city of Oakland after Iraq war protesters

accused police of using excessive force to break up a raucous demonstration.

In 2003, Burris won a \$10.9 million settlement from Oakland to settle the notorious "Riders" case, in which police allegedly arrested and planted evidence on 119 innocent suspects. It remains the city's largest settlement.

"Every case begets another case," he said.

His biggest target, by far, is the Oakland Police Department.

Neither Oakland City Attorney John Russo, whose

office routinely fights Burris' lawsuits, nor Oakland Police Department union president Dom Arotzarena were willing to share their thoughts about Burris.

Burris has sometimes been in trouble with the law himself. In 2005, a federal judge sharply rebuked him for failing to properly investigate a claim before filing one lawsuit.

U.S. District Court Judge Vaughn Walker fined Burris and another lawyer \$10,800 for filing a lawsuit after only a single interview with the clients, who accused the po-

lice department of wrongly killing a mentally disturbed Oakland resident who stabbed an officer. Burris defended himself before the judge by pointing to his long track record of filing successful lawsuits.

"Indeed, Burris' years of experience and success serve to magnify the egregiousness of the conduct at issue in this case," Walker said in ordering sanctions.

Burris' clients fired him in 2007, and the judge filed a complaint to the State Bar last year. Burris said he hired a lawyer to write a letter to

the state bar, and that officials there "closed the file" without taking any disciplinary action.

It wasn't the first time Burris got into legal hot water. In 1996, the State Bar suspended him for 30 days for sending misleading solicitations to victims of mass disasters, which he blamed on overzealous underlings. He was also chided at the same time for improperly mixing clients' money with his own, and the bar found that he "recklessly failed to perform legal services with competence," according to

bar records. But it was that same year that Burris worked on what would be his proudest case.

Burris said he defended for free a 6-year-old boy charged with assault for dumping an infant out of a bassinet and then beating him.

Burris convinced a juvenile court referee to put the boy into foster care rather than the criminal system.

Burris said he has kept in contact with his client, who is soon to be released from state care as an 18-year-old. "He made it," Burris said.



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