

BUSINESS

Discrimination, stereotypes, systemic barriers — the Davis brothers shattered them all on their climb to Bay Street's top

Paul and Rob Davis arrived in Canada from Jamaica with their parents in the 1970s and faced an uphill battle to success. Now Paul is chair of McMillan, Rob is chair of KPMG Canada, and they're breaking new ground.

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JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Call it an outsized first-generation Canadian success story. Times two.

Paul Davis, already one of the country's top corporate lawyers, was elected to the prestigious position of chair at the Bay Street law firm McMillan last month. That came less than a year after his younger brother Rob Davis, a chartered accountant and tax and finance expert, was named chair of accounting firm giant KPMG Canada.

Almost five decades earlier, their parents, Louis and Dorcas Davis, were on the verge of changing their lives forever. Dorcas had visited Canada on holiday with Rob and liked it so much that the Davises applied for Canadian work visas. When the papers came through on Christmas Eve of 1974, they had just two months to make a call.

"It was a big decision, economically and socially," says Louis, recalling the conversations he had with his wife about leaving a comfortable, upper-middle-class life in Jamaica behind and bringing their four boys to Toronto where they felt education and new opportunities awaited.

"As parents, we thought the kids were more important than anything, because they were coming up and we were going down."

Louis laughs, but he's serious, too. "If there's anything beyond the ceiling, they can go through that ceiling."

Paul and Rob are matter of fact when they say that failing to make good was never an option. It wasn't explicit pressure from their parents, but something they just understood about the sacrifice that was made. What it was all for.

Their latest achievements don't come as a surprise to their parents — though make no mistake, Louis and Dorcas are fiercely proud of their sons — but as Black men in high-profile roles at prominent professional firms, the brothers are breaking new ground.

It's not always the most comfortable feeling, they say. The pair doesn't want to be in the spotlight just because they're Black men, but they've also seen what it means to others, to a younger generation of Black professionals, to have them in these roles.

“It would be great if the story had nothing to do with us being Black but just being two brothers who are chairs of large organizations,” says Paul. “And when those type of conversations become the norm, then things will have changed.”



Legal and accounting firms have not traditionally collected or published numbers on Black representation among partnership ranks, but the public data that is available suggests the picture has been dismal for years.

There are numerous reasons why, including anti-Black racism, systemic barriers to education that contribute to lower levels of recruitment, and a failure by firms to assign good files to Black lawyers or accountants. In professional service businesses, you can't make partner without face time with important clients.

“I have mentored students who are now senior associates at several law firms and some of those law firms still don't have a Black partner,” Paul says.

In 2018, just 1 per cent of law firm partners in Ontario were Black, compared to 4.2 per cent of the province's overall population, according to the Law Society of Ontario.

Black lawyers underrepresented at the top

Data from the Law Society of Ontario showed poor representation of Black lawyers at the partnership level in 2018.

3.16% Percentage of Ontario lawyers who were Black.

7,008

Number of lawyers in the province who were law firm partners.

73

Number of Black lawyers in the province who were law firm partners.

64%

Percentage of law firm partners in the province who were white.

1%

Percentage of law firm partners in the province who were Black.

SOURCE: LAW SOCIETY OF ONTARIO

STAR GRAPHIC

In the U.S., where a greater proportion of the population identifies as Black than in Canada, the picture is similar for accountants. Black people accounted for 2 per cent of partners at accounting firms in 2018, according to the Association of International Certified Public Accountants.

If making partner is rare for Black lawyers and accountants, breaking into the highest ranks of CEO or chair is another story altogether.

“Their success is bigger than them,” Charlene Theodore says of the Davis brothers. Theodore, who has been chief inclusion officer at McCarthy Tétrault since January, broke barriers herself when she became the [first Black president of the Ontario Bar Association](#) in 2020.

“There is a collective sense of joy and celebration that comes with recognizing the power of seeing someone like yourself in places you might not have been even four or five years ago,” says Theodore, who is also the child of parents who came to Canada from the Caribbean.

“There’s joy in that because there’s progress. But I also see it as a call to action. It reminds us we have more work to do.”

When the Davises moved to Canada, they spent the first six months in Scarborough before settling in a condo in Pickering. In the late 1970s, the city was more rural than it is today, and the four boys were often the only Black kids in their late-elementary and high school classes.

That was a new experience, Rob says, after spending their early childhood years in Jamaica, where they never thought about their skin colour. There were challenges here, he says — name-calling, kids touching his hair — but he also made good friends who stood up for him. “I certainly saw both sides of it.”

Paul recalls some teachers making assumptions about him, taking it for granted that he was good at basketball, for instance, when he had never played the game in his life. The straight-A student (his younger brother interrupts to say that’s an understatement, that to be precise, Paul was top of his high school class) did end up playing for the varsity team.

He studied economics at Carleton University and went on to the University of Toronto for law school, overlapping with Rob, who was pursuing a bachelor of commerce at U of T around the same time. Paul, the only Black student in his law class, was focused and disciplined, says his former classmate Tim Murphy, who was named CEO of McMillan last month, and he ended up at the top of his class yet again.

The brothers ventured into the buttoned-up worlds of law and accounting in the late 1980s. About to begin his first week as a summer student at Davies Ward Phillips & Vineberg, a friend told Paul he had to take him shopping, saying, “People can tell you’re poor, you cannot wear that suit.”

Deals were closed in person back in those days, and a few years later, Paul often found himself redirected to the mail room when he turned up at the reception desks of other law firms for the closings. “I was kind of insulted, because remember, I’d gotten better suits by then,” he jokes now.

The Davis brothers had no Black partners in their firms to look up to, but both say they had mentors — “obviously all white,” says Paul — who genuinely helped them advance.

Still, neither had a straight climb to the top of the corporate ladder.

Rob left KPMG to work in-house for a tech company and jobs at other companies followed. He [told the Star last year](#) that while his mentors assured him he was partner material, “when I looked to leadership, I didn’t see people who looked like me.” By the time he returned to the firm in 2005, he says KPMG was putting more emphasis on inclusion and diversity, and he himself became a mentor.

He's a calm leader who cares about his colleagues, says Anthony Brown, a transfer pricing partner at KPMG who's looked to Rob as a mentor. Over the years, Rob has hosted countless team dinners at the Toronto home he shares with his husband of 17 years, focused on "making sure people were fed and happy," Brown says, adding, "it underlines that as a leader you don't have to change your inherent personality."

Paul left his first firm Davies in the mid 1990s when his three children were young and the self-professed "workaholic" was looking for more balance in his life. After stints at private and public companies and an investment firm, he returned to law-firm life in 2010, and played a key role in building McMillan's capital markets practice, which he now leads.

"It's now one of our most successful groups, and Paul had a lot to do with that," says McMillan CEO Murphy, who adds that Paul's leadership attracted others to the group and was one factor that made him a natural fit for chair.

Survey calls for more Black leaders

In a January survey of more than 1,000 Black Canadians, respondents expressed a clear desire to see more Black people in leadership roles. Here's what they said employers could do to reduce anti-Black racism in the workplace.



SOURCE: KPMG LLP

STAR GRAPHIC

Both brothers have had a long-standing interest in improving diversity at their firms, efforts that intensified after the police murder of George Floyd in the U.S. in 2020 and Canada's own reckoning with its mistreatment of Black and Indigenous people.

McMillan faced its own controversy in June 2020, when Stockwell Day, then a strategic adviser to the firm, suggested that systemic racism doesn't exist in Canada. He stepped down from the role after the comments.

"Events like that bring home the point that you need to be consistent," says Murphy. "People can smell hypocrisy pretty quickly, so you need to ensure that you are living up to the principles you're articulating."

Under a new management team that includes Paul's leadership as chair, Murphy says diversity is part of the firm's strategic plan.

"We have to change the system, because unconscious bias training alone simply does not work," says Paul, referencing the now-ubiquitous corporate-led sessions meant to expose employees' inherent biases and prompt them to understand how that influences

their actions.

Instead, he says, while recruiting people from more diverse backgrounds is a priority for McMillan, there is also great emphasis on promoting and retaining those people, which “is the hard work.”

Many clients are demanding more diversity on the legal teams they hire and the old boys’ club of corporate Canada is less of a factor than it was in the past, Paul says.

But it still exists. “At the end of the day, advisory businesses are about relationships.”

Addressing that in part means thinking differently about how the firm spends money earmarked for business development. If a networking event only appeals to a certain demographic, for example, he questions why the firm is going at all.

At the end of an hour-long interview, the brothers reflect on the flurry of recent efforts by firms to attract and promote Black professionals.

“I’m optimistic,” says Rob. “I try to be a glass-half-full kind of guy. But we’re not seeing the results yet,” he says. “We’re not seeing enough people like Paul and I in leadership positions yet. I’m pretty confident that that will happen over time. But it’s only going to happen if we continue the conversation.”

Paul says he shares the family trait of optimism, and while some of the momentum has waned in the past two years, he, too, believes keeping the conversation going can create pressure for change.

“I long for the day when this is no longer a story.”