I traveled to Chicago in April to present the winner of the Kasparov Chess Foundation’s National Girls Championship with a $105,000 scholarship to attend The University of Texas at Dallas and to interview George Leighton for this profile. I invited him to help me present the award but he demurred. “Tim,” he said, “in our days at the Chicago Chess Club, if someone mentioned a $105,000 scholarship for girls’ chess, they would have undergone a court-ordered psychiatric evaluation.” I tried to work him into the award ceremony for the champion, Alexandra V. Botez, anyway.

George Leighton nodded. We have made a great deal of progress towards racial equality in this country, a fact easily confirmed by simply looking around the room. I continued: “I invited George Leighton to participate in today’s award ceremony, but he had to work over the weekend at his law office on a pressing case.” Many more in the audience nodded. These days, we all have to work long hours just to stay on top of things. These chess parents, who sacrifice so their children can play chess, understand perfectly.

“A profile of the Honorable George N. Leighton”

By Dr. Tim Redman | Photos by Betsy Dynako

Merely listing George's professional accomplishments and accolades would take several pages. He helped found one of the largest predominantly black law firms in the United States: Moore, Ming, and Leighton. He is a life member of the NAACP. He argued a number of constitutionally important cases advancing the cause of civil rights in this country in the '60s and '70s. He was elected judge of the Circuit Court of Cook County in 1964, assigned as judge of the Illinois Appellate Court in 1969, and elected to that office in 1970. President Gerald Ford nominated him as judge of the United States District Court and he was confirmed by the United States Senate in 1976. He was for many years a professor at John Marshall Law School and has been awarded five honorary doctorates. In 2005, the United States Post Office in New Bedford was named in his honor. Most recently, on May 6, 2011, he was given the prestigious Cardinal Bernardin Award from the Chicago Legal Clinic for “action on behalf of social justice, advocacy for the less advantaged, and passionate promotion of the ideal that we are our brother’s keepers.” I wrote to Harold J. Winston, former USCF president, current chair of the U.S.

Chess Life captured in the recent issue of the magazine and asked questions about Hikaru Nakamura. George Neves Leitao was born on October 22, 1912 in New Bedford, Massachusetts. He was the son of two Portuguese nationals, natives of the Cape Verde Islands, a 14-island archipelago off the coast of Africa that was a Portuguese colony for more than 400 years. His name was Anglicized to Leighton. Raised in New Bedford and on Cape Cod, he finished sixth grade but then dropped out because he had to work in cranberry bogs managed by his father to help support the family.

Mary A. Hayden, who ran a local boys’ club, taught him the rudiments of chess. “It was the greatest gift I have ever been given,” George told me. He has since become an avid chess player. He is also the first black person appointed to the federal bench in Illinois, as judge of the United States District Court. Many in the audience nodded. We have made a great deal of progress towards racial equality in this country, a fact easily confirmed by simply looking around the room.

“George Leighton is 98 years old.” At this point there was an audible gasp from those present. “Chess keeps you sharp,” I finished.

Chess Life caught up with George at his office at the prestigious law firm of Neal and Leroy on LaSalle Street, Chicago’s equivalent of Wall Street, where he is “Of Counsel.” George has kept up with his chess. He had the recent issue of the magazine and asked questions about Hikaru Nakamura.

George kept it and it has served as his talisman ever since, to remind him of how hard he had to work to succeed. Enclosed in Plexiglas, it is still on his desk. After four straight years on the dean’s honor roll at Howard, he was awarded a degree magna cum laude. He received a scholarship to attend Harvard Law School and, after war service, graduated in 1946. George passed the bar in Massachusetts and, after arriving in Chicago, in Illinois.

Addressing several hundred students, parents, and coaches, I said: “I spent a pleasant Friday afternoon with an old friend, George Leighton. George is an avid chess player. He is also the first black person appointed to the federal bench in Illinois, as judge of the United States District Court.” Many in the audience nodded. These days, we all have to work long hours just to stay on top of things. These chess parents, who sacrifice so their children can play chess, understand perfectly.

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I wrote to Harold J. Winston, former USCF president, current chair of the U.S. Chess Life — September 2011

Chess Life — September 2011
Chess Trust, and a prominent Chicago public defender for橘子 kitchens about the char
George. Harold summarized it nicely: “I have attended several legal get-togethers in
the last three years at which Judge Leighton was honored. He is greatly respected by all
the U.S. Chess Federation; Dr. Eugene A. N. Leighton is greatly respected by all
the Chicago Chess Club, the city’s only seven-day-a-
professor at the University of Chicago; Phil LeCorre, a businessman who later left his estate to
the U.S. Chess Federation; Dr. Eugene Martinovsky, a psychiatrist and chess
master, along with a goodly number of other masters. The characters included
Danny Fischer, who divided his time between Chicago, where he was a slum landlord, and Las Vegas, where he gambled, and Walter Grombacher, a hypochondriac who would insist on describing his symp-
toms to Dr. Martinovsky and who boasted that he had been the only Jewish member of the Hitler Youth.
George and I shared some laughs recalling some of these folks. He was genuinely fond of Richard Verber, who
was Chicago Chess Club president for many years. Richard, a Falstaffian man, was one of the nation’s top players (he
turned down an invitation to the U.S. Closed Championship one year) and a top
organizer. Richard organized the record-
breaking U.S. Open in August 1973 and put on what was the nation’s first “ches-
sathan,” though we didn’t have a name
put on what was the nation’s first “ches-
Queen’s Pawn Opening: Unusual lines (D00)
George N. Leighton
Leonid Kaushansky
23. ... cd6 24. axb3 cd6 25. Ba4+ Kf8 26. Nc5 Bb4 27. Bb3 g6 28. a4 Bg7 29. Nc6 Qc7 2...