

Law professor driven to success

BY DEAN POLING

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VALDOSTA — Roy Copeland describes himself as driven.

The South Georgia native traveled across the nation to attend school, to return home to Valdosta as a successful attorney, to become a founder of the 100 Black Men of Valdosta, a member of the Valdosta-Lowndes County Development Authority, a recent appointee to the Georgia Council for Criminal Justice Reform, and an assistant professor teaching law classes at Valdosta State University.

He sees the same trait in successful students in his classes.

Copeland wanted to be a doctor. He arrived at the University of Southern California to study biology and "realized everybody was smarter than me," he said.

He changed his major from biology to political science, with the decision to become an attorney. The change suited him. He had great professors — Paul Kovik, Carl Christol, Mark Kahn. He learned from them. He pushed himself.

As a professor, Copeland has seen the trait in some of his students. Some students are smart but "some students are better prepared. Some students are driven," he said.

"I was driven. I knew if I failed I would end up back in Valdosta working in a tobacco field. ... Everybody knew I went to California to go to school. If I came back, they would know I failed. I was scared of failing. I was driven."

Driven and inspired. Forty years later, Cope-

land assigned in various classes. He recalls advice given to him by certain professors. He recalls the excitement of learning new things, being in a different place and realizing the possibilities for his life.

Roy Copeland is the oldest son of George and Mary Lou Copeland. Copeland has two brothers, Mark Copeland and Gary Copeland; the three brothers are each spaced two years apart. He has a half-sister, Sandra Tooley, the Valdosta City Council member.

Copeland recalls he and his brothers being mischievous growing up in Valdosta. Not too mischievous. Their father was strict but believed in traditional roles.

When his sons were 6, 7, 8 years old, George Copeland, a truck driver, said his sons should not have to do "women's work." He declared they should no longer have to do the dishes. Mrs. Copeland said if the sons no longer had to do the dishes then the father would do them. Mr. Copeland capitulated. The sons would continue doing the dishes.

From the age of 9, Roy Copeland had a job. He recalled driving a truck as a 12-year-old to pick up lunch for the other workers. He worked in tobacco fields. He worked for Ashley Paulk's Valdosta Electric.

A black child, he attended school in the early years of integration. Pine Grove Elementary School. Hahira Middle School. Lowndes High School.

"I have nothing but positive memories of my school years and growing up here," Copeland said.

Still as an African-American growing up in the mid-20th century,

traveled. There was no guarantee a black family on the road would find a place to eat, a place to safely stay overnight.

Still, his uncle and aunt Ben and Vernell Copeland had moved to California. Roy Copeland traveled there to attend USC.

Graduating the University of Southern California, Copeland first returned to Georgia attending University of Georgia law school, then via Atlanta, where he worked for a law firm.

Returning to Valdosta in 1987, his first case made his legal reputation locally. A woman slipped and fell on a hot dog in a grocery store. She injured her knee. Copeland won the case. The jury awarded his client \$168,000, which at the time was the largest jury award in Lowndes County.

"All of the slip-and-fall cases came to me," Copeland said with a laugh.

The case also allowed him to break the color barrier.

Copeland recalls a white woman arriving to hire him as an attorney. She said, "I didn't know you were black." It didn't matter, Copeland said. She just didn't know. She hired him.

Copeland sued the police department in the late 1980s. He worked actively as an attorney.

He and wife Cheryl have four children, Roy II, Rachelle, Kelleigh, Kameron.

He has worked as an attorney in Valdosta for years, but a few years ago, he had the opportunity to attain his dream job —



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Roy Copeland is a Valdosta attorney who teaches law courses at Valdosta State University.

teaching college courses through the College of Business at Valdosta State University.

He said he prepared for the job interview as if he were preparing for a jury trial. He got the job.

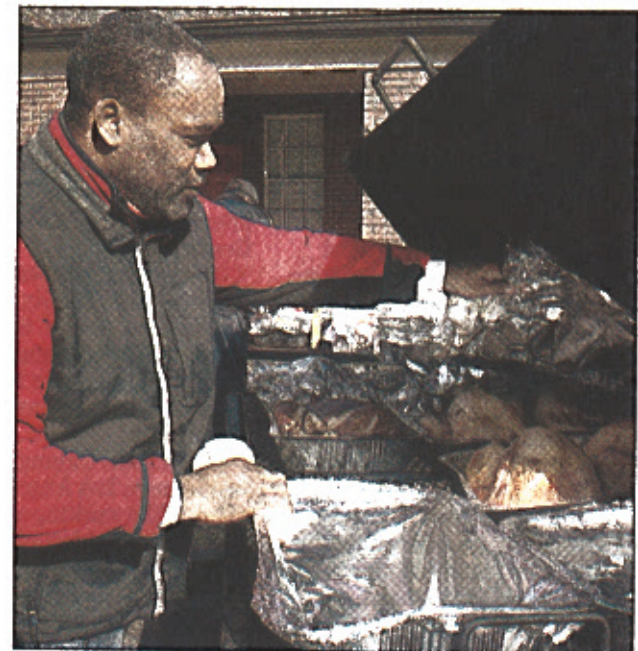
He keeps a limited law practice, by choice. Copeland now spends the majority of his days teaching university students. His classes include employment law, business law, health-care law, etc.

As a professor, Copeland reaches back to the adults of his childhood and youth — the professors, his parents, his employers.

"I'm a taskmaster," Copeland said.

As a parent who has had children attend college, Copeland said he feels responsible to his students' parents that the people in his classes receive the best education possible.

He is driven to see they learn in his classes. He's in-



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Roy Copeland is a founding member of the 100 Black Men of Valdosta.

spired by his colleagues.

"What you realize at the College of Business is how smart your colleagues

are," Copeland said, "and I'm elated to be with such an accomplished group of people."