

Lesra Martin: One Of The Most Prominent Canadian Barristers

Written by Patricia Turnier
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Lesra Martin was born in 1963 to Earl and Alma Martin. He was the second eldest son of eight children. The family initially enjoyed a middle class lifestyle until Earl Martin suffered an injury and could no longer work. The family was soon mired in poverty, and was even homeless at some point. Lesra Martin was raised in Bed-Stuy (Bedford Stuyvesant), New York. When he was 10-11 years-old, he took the initiative to bag groceries and sweep up in a local bar. The siblings also had to work at an early age to support the family. Lesra Martin was poor, quasi-illiterate and dismissed by society. He struggled on the violent streets of Brooklyn. In spite of this situation, his heart was filled with the hope of élan and courage. In July 1979, a chance encounter with a group of Canadian entrepreneurs changed the course of his life; they saw his potential and pulled him from the chaos of the inner city. They brought him to Canada where he was given a fresh start. His journey and odyssey began in the fall of 1979, as he was struggling with quasi-illiteracy and self-doubt in Toronto. During his time in this city, he discovered the autobiography of the American boxer Rubin Hurricane Carter, *The 16th Round: From #1 Contender to Prisoner #45472*. It was the first book Martin ever bought in his life for 25 cents at a used book sale. Lesra Martin wrote to the boxer which eventually led to a genuine friendship between them. Martin and his sponsors later became heroes and the catalysts when they helped in the release of wrongfully convicted and imprisoned boxer Rubin Carter for the 1966 triple-murder of New Jersey residents, in November 1985. The reversal was big news, nationally and internationally. Rubin Carter's story had moved the world since his imprisonment. He received the support of many celebrities such as the world champion boxer Muhammad Ali. Who can also forget Bob Dylan and Jacques Levy's song Hurricane? Carter's story resulted in the 1991 best selling book *Lazarus and The Hurricane* which inspired the 1999 Hollywood blockbuster feature film *The Hurricane* starring Denzel Washington as Rubin Carter. The movie was directed by the high-profile Canadian Norman Jewison, a Governor-General Award recipient and an Academy Award-nominated filmmaker. The character and life of Lesra Martin was portrayed in this famous film by the actor Vicellous Reon Shannon. In 2000, it received a second Oscar nomination for Denzel Washington in the best actor category. He also received a Golden Globe award for *The Hurricane* as best actor in 2000. In 2002, an NFB documentary on Lesra Martin's inspiring life was produced, entitled *The journey of Lesra Martin*. This documentary was directed by Cheryl Foggo and produced by Selwyn Jacob. *The Journey of Lesra Martin* has been screened at film festivals throughout Canada and the world, among which, at the Hollywood Black Film Festival, Black Film Festival (San Francisco, U.S.), The Urban Literary Film Festival (Greensboro, U.S.), and the 24th International Durban Film Festival (Durban, South Africa).

In 1983, Martin graduated as an Ontario Scholar and completed his Honours BA in Anthropology at the University of Toronto in 1988. In 1997, he earned his law degree from one of the top law faculties in Canada, the Dalhousie Law School and served as Crown Prosecutor in Kamloops, British Columbia. He was also briefly enrolled in a doctoral program in Sociology at the University of Toronto. In this respect, having found the

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intestinal fortitude to change his own life, today Lesra Martin is a highly regarded civil lawyer with an expertise in personal injuries. He and his wife Cheryl Martin (parents of two girls) also a barrister are partners in their own law firm, Martin & Martin Lawyers. Lesra Martin is also a solicitor and worldwide motivational speaker. Since The Hurricane was released, Martin has received international attention, inspiring him to embark on a career as a motivational speaker. He was invited to speak before the General Assembly delegates of the United Nations, where he gave an impassioned speech

about the devastating effects of illiteracy and poverty. He did the same thing in other venues such as Cambridge University, addressing world leaders. Lesra Martin also spoke to many national, community, and corporate groups, as well as companies such as IBM and General Motors, and literacy foundations, about his experiences and the devastating effects of illiteracy. Lesra Martin has made guest appearances on the Oprah Winfrey Show and Larry King Live, among others. The Press media from The New York Times and The Washington Post to Sports Illustrated and Reader's Digest Magazine have chronicled aspects of his life. He has received the YMCA Black Achievers Partner in Excellence Award (Ohio), as well as numerous other awards and certificates of recognition.

Through his inspiring and empowering presentations, Lesra Martin demonstrates to audiences that the capacity to make a difference exists in each of us. Lesra Martin's life is a triumph of will over adversity. His unwillingness to accept the limitations of ghetto life allowed him to overcome and succeed against the odds. Mr. Martin strongly believes that limits exist only in the mind. The brilliant lawyer is a down-to-earth individual in spite of all his accomplishments which make people appreciate him even more. He has never forgotten who he was and where he came from. The late Coretta Scott King noted that "Young Lazarus will win your heart" in the best seller Lazarus and the Hurricane. Martin's new book The Power of a Promise was released on the 46th anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, one of the most important orations of the 20th century delivered the 28th of August 1963.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsmszHWnO3k>