

Defying the odds



LIONEL ROOKWOOD/PHOTOGRAPHER

It's the season of cool breezes, lights, laughter, and smiling faces, and these children from the Bethany Infant School in Kingston were caught up in the spirit of the Yuletide season on the monkey bars, even after their Christmas concert ended yesterday.

■ Conviction pushes man to pursue law degree
■ Now among newest lawyers in Jamaican Bar

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THERE WERE hugs and kisses all around as Isat Buchanan posed for pictures with a small group of family and friends on Tuesday on the steps of the Supreme Court.

But the subdued celebration belied the improbable odds Buchanan defied to become a full-fledged attorney, authorised to practise in the courts across Jamaica and the Caribbean.

Twenty-one years ago, Buchanan was preparing to travel overseas when he said a neighbour asked him to deliver some cash to someone in the United States (US).

"I was stopped at the [Norman



BUCHANAN

Manley International] airport. They confiscated the packages and later said that it was drugs," he recounted yesterday of his arrest in 1996.

Buchanan said that he appeared

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before then Resident Magistrate Martin Gayle, who offered him bail and indicated that he would recuse himself from the case because of the “unfortunate” circumstances.

He was eventually convicted and paid a fine of approximately \$1 million, but that was just the beginning of his legal dilemma.

In 1999, Buchanan said he was on a flight to Florida, in the United States, when a quantity of drugs was found in the possession of another passenger. He said that the passenger directed authorities to him, saying that he was the person responsible.

“When they told that to the Feds (American federal authorities), they actually arrested me and they found me guilty by myself,” he acknowledged.

Buchanan was given a 10-year prison sentence as according to him, authorities in the US formed the view that the incident was a continuing act from his drug case in Jamaica and that he had got off easy.

“The judge in American felt that [the \$1 million fine imposed in Jamaica] was a slap on the wrist. So they actually doubled



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my sentence,” Buchanan told **The Gleaner**.

But rather than getting down on himself, Buchanan used his ordeal as motivation to expand his knowledge of the law, while simultaneously helping Jamaicans and other inmates he encountered in the American penal system.

“I was teaching in the institution as well as doing legal work, and I was actually successful in getting people’s sentences reduced and [getting them] sent home,” he shared.

His decision to immerse himself in legal work while serving his sentence, Buchanan explained, was born out of the belief that the American justice system was “really flawed”.

“It was the first time that I realised that I was just a statistic in America, so to find solace and console myself, I had to read and research just to understand this thing,” he said.

ONE FINAL HURDLE

Buchanan said that following his deportation, he took up a music career, while volunteering to help persons residing in inner-city communities, but quickly found the need for his newly acquired legal skills.

“I managed an apartment and I had the worst tenants ever. You had to use the law to ensure that you don’t break the law,” he said.

Five years ago, he enrolled at the Mona campus of the

University of the West Indies (UWI), and on Tuesday, Buchanan was formally called to the Bar in a short ceremony presided over by Martin Gayle, now a judge of the Supreme Court.

But before yesterday’s ceremony, there was one final obstacle he had to hurdle.

Word of his convictions leaked to his peers at the UWI, and soon, a petition was being circulated to block him from entering the legal profession.

According to Buchanan, the concerns reached the General Legal Council (GLC), the watchdog entity for the legal profession. “The concern was that they were going to let someone into the fraternity who had a prior (conviction),” he explained.

However, he said that Allan Wood, chairman of the GLC, noted that his rehabilitation had been exceptional.

Buchanan is unsure of his next move but made it clear that he wants to help others understand their rights.

“I’m passionate about helping people. I’m passionate about helping people understand their rights,” he said.

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