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USING A telephone pole as a battering ram, the mob broke into the Somerset County jail and took George Armwood. They forced a noose around his neck and dragged him through the streets. He was hanged from an oak tree along Princess Anne's main road and his body set on fire. He was a 28-year-old black man lynched on Oct. 18, 1933, for allegedly attacking a 71-year-old white woman.

Less than 12 miles away, H. Webster Cane Sr. took notice and never forgot. In the years that followed, he made sure his young boys knew exactly what had happened that fateful day. The lesson, he told them, was this: The Eastern Shore is a dangerous place for a black man. But he also told them that their day would come, to not lose hope, to never think themselves less than a white man and to take advantage of what opportunities came.

So growing up in tiny Marion Station, Rudy and Honiss Cane refused to live lives without ambition. They worked for their father, selling cars at his used car lot, fixing meals for workers at the local packing plant, and later, helping out at his nightclub. So what if a black man wasn't allowed to vacation in nearby Ocean City? The brothers Cane would pile into a car from their dad's lot and drive to the New Jersey shore.

This month, Rudy Cane did his father proud. He was elected chairman of the Maryland General Assembly's 43-member Legislative Black Caucus, besting a Baltimore delegate by three votes. It's the first time an Eastern Shoreman has ever held the post. But it couldn't have been a big surprise to anyone who knows the Canes.

Two decades ago, the Cane brothers were at the forefront of a movement to elect Eastern Shore blacks to public office. The U.S. Department of Justice and the American Civil Liberties Union filed a series of lawsuits calling for Shore towns and counties to create majority-black voter districts. Many of these communities refused. Their leaders spent huge sums on legal fees. But civil rights activists prevailed - and the Shore's political landscape changed.

In 1986, Honiss Webster Cane Jr. was elected to a seat on Pocomoke City's Town Council. It was something that no black man had ever done. At age 72, he still holds the post. Rudolph C. Cane, 69, went even further. He was elected to the House of Delegates in 1998 after losing the 1994 election by just 20 votes.

The Canes' success has left a mark. Rudy's 37A legislative district, which runs from Salisbury to Cambridge, is now majority-white, but he had no trouble getting re-elected in 2002. Honiss flexes plenty of political muscle, too - he's known as the man to see in Pocomoke. They are both politicians to the core, cheerful and unpretentious, proud of their wives and the families they've raised. And they love to talk, perhaps a legacy of their car salesmen pasts. When an angry caller once threatened to burn a cross in his yard, Rudy told him to do it - he would go outside and warm himself by the blaze.

How much has the Eastern Shore evolved since the lynching of George Armwood? On this subject, the Canes are still wary. "I don't know if times have changed or not," says Rudy, a former state highway materials engineer and now head of a Salisbury-based nonprofit agency. "But I will do what I can within the confines of the law."

Winning the caucus post was a proud moment for the family. It meant, the Canes said, that the Baltimore-Prince George's black political axis must now give Eastern Shore blacks a place at the table, too. Their only disappointments are that their father wasn't here to experience their success (he died in 1988) and that neither holds office in his native (and still racially polarized) Somerset County. "I would have loved it if one of us had gotten elected in Somerset," says Honiss. "But it's extremely sweet when a stranger embraces you, too."

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