

Sarisohn's back in political swing

By KARL GROSSMAN

Very early, very young, Floyd Sarisohn was a rising young Democratic star in Suffolk politics. But, as a judge he was dismissed from the bench in a highly-charged judicial fracas which finally forced his chief adversary the presiding judge, to resign.

It was several years of widely-publicized mud-hurling that would have made most people lose their interest in politics.

But Sarisohn got back into the water. He worked his way up to Smithtown Town Democratic chairman, and in recent years has become one of the main figures within the now successful Suffolk Democratic Party.

He'll be honored at a testimonial dinner Friday night, at which a wide array of people in important political and judicial positions are expected.

RAISED IN St. Albans, Sarisohn attended New York University and St. John's Law School and then came to Suffolk, with his wife Bernice, to raise a family.

He commuted a while to Nassau and then opened his own law practice, with his brother Bernard ("Bud"), in Commack.

Quickly getting involved in politics, Sarisohn became a Smithtown justice of the peace (at 31), defeating John V. N. Klein. He's the only person who ever won against the present Republican Suffolk County executive.

He ran for the State Senate and then, in 1963, was elected to the newly-formed Suffolk District Court system.

"Floyd would have become Smithtown Town supervisor in that year if he had run for that instead of the court," said John Klein last week. Klein made it in as town supervisor that year "by only 148 votes," he noted, against a "weak nominee. If it had been Floyd, a strong candidate, no question I'd have lost."

SARISOHN WAS elected to the six-member District Court bench with two other Democrats — now Supreme Court



Karl Grossman

Justices Frank P. De Luca and Victor J. Orgera.

It was an unusual win for Democrats in the 1960s, when the Suffolk GOP was all but omnipotent.

Sarisohn, given to pushing for innovations in his official life, initiated a variety of programs at the District Court — a plan to have blacks freed awaiting trial on the recommendation of civil rights organizations, a plan to have youths in malicious mischief cases personally repair the damage they did, visits to hospitals by drunken drivers.

Sarisohn's actions upset the presiding judge of the court, and later judges of the Appellate Division, which supervise lower courts. Judicial misconduct charges were brought. Sarisohn was removed from the bench. Sarisohn backers brought charges against his opponents within the judicial system.

CHARGES WERE brought against the presiding judge, and the entire District Court system was investigated by the Appellate Division, the first time in New York State a whole court system came under judicial investigation. Some major administration and staff changes were brought about.

Sarisohn went on to do criminal defense work, specializing in uphill causes, headed a county consumer council and with his brother and other partners joined in a cross-continental law partnership (which continues) with flamboyant San Francisco attorney Melvin Belli.

When he took over the Smithtown Democratic leadership in 1970, Sarisohn said: "The Republican Party . . . made an obvious political attempt to bury me, and they're going to be somewhat upset to see a phoenix rise."

Indeed, the phoenix has now fully risen. Sarisohn is a senior among Suffolk Democratic leaders. More than any town chairman, he was responsible for the candidacy of the county's newly elected Democratic district attorney, Henry F. O'Brien. He's a key idea man for Suffolk Democrats.

What are the chances of Sarisohn, only 46, running himself for political office again in Suffolk? There are those in Suffolk politics who wouldn't be surprised.