

IN THE PIPELINE:

JDC's Scholarship Program Promotes Local Diversity

Kathleen Guthrie Woods

In 1998, the Justice & Diversity Center (JDC) of The Bar Association of San Francisco (BASF) awarded its first Bay Area Minority Law Student Scholarships in an effort to improve diversity in local law schools and the legal profession. Recipients were selected based on academic performance and financial need, as well as a commitment to the community. To date, the program has provided over ninety students with more than \$2 million.

In 2017, four new scholarships were awarded, and each recipient will receive \$30,000, divided into three \$10,000 annual payments that may go toward tuition, books, rent, and other academic and living expenses. It's an investment that makes it possible for these students to attend and excel in law school and sets them on paths to successful careers.

The ultimate goal is to see diversity throughout the profession. "These things take more time than one would hope," says Steve Love, JDC's director of Donor and Community Engagement, "but we're making progress."

"By giving, you get to be part of advancing the goals we so treasure in this city — tolerance, acceptance, and nurturing of cultural differences and diversity."

— Richard Zitrin

Past, Present, and Future Stories of Success

Inspired by a desire to create change, **Jamal Jackson** (2016 recipient) chose to attend Golden Gate University (GGU) School of Law after he received his undergraduate degree in criminal justice, with a minor in environmental science, from Iona College in New York. He completed his first year, and this past summer held an internship at the Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment in Oakland where he worked on multiple environmental justice projects that addressed issues in lower-income and disadvantaged communities.

“It’s not just one person,” he says when asked whom he’d like to thank for his scholarship, “it’s everyone. They’ve all been amazing influences.”

Jackson has been accepted into GGU’s Environmental Justice Clinic for the fall.

At the time of her interview in June, **Lidia Lopez** (2013) had just been sworn in as an attorney—that morning! “It’s starting to feel real,” she says. “I’m owning it, I’m not dreaming.”

Before attending UC Hastings College of the Law, Lopez, who started her undergraduate studies in engineering, had the opportunity to work with tech companies in Silicon Valley. She was, and continues to be, fascinated by intellectual property law, and today she is working as an associate in a trademarking and copyright group.

“I currently love where I’m at and what I’m doing,” she says, “but I’m looking for opportunities to shape my career.” Her



Jamal Jackson

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priorities include being a resource to her extended family and volunteering as an interpreter in her community.

Elva Linares (2011) was fifteen years old when she decided to become a lawyer. “I was working in the field, packing figs, doing manual labor, and I thought ‘I don’t want this



Jora Trang

“Without it (the minority scholarship), I could not have gone to law school, nor could I have made the impact I have over the past twenty years as an attorney.”

life,” she says. “I wanted to go to law school to be a voice for the community and to be able to defend myself.”

She originally set her sights on a career in immigration law, then her “exciting path” took a turn into politics. While in law school, she interned with then Vice President Joe Biden and later was appointed to President Barack Obama’s administration for two years. Later she was an associate

counselor with the US Department of Labor, Congressional Affairs Office, and today she is legislative counsel at the US Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General. “I like what I do, preparing for congressional hearings,” she says, and she still finds time to volunteer for the Court-Appointed Special Advocate Program (CASA) as an interpreter and translator.

“The minority scholarship is not just an instrumental tool in fostering tomorrow’s social justice champions, it is essential,” says **Jora Trang** (1998). “Without it, I could not have gone to law school, nor could I have made the impact I have over the past twenty years as an attorney.”

Trang spent over a decade as an attorney representing clients in cases that often addressed race and gender discrimination. “I realized there were systemic issues I could not address by representing people one at a time,” she says, and she made the shift to impact litigation when she became a senior attorney at Equal Rights Advocates in San Francisco.

Today she is managing attorney at Worksafe, a nonprofit organization that strives to prevent on-the-job injuries and empower workers to advocate for their right to safe and healthy workplaces. In 2016, she was recognized with a National Council for Occupational Safety and Health (COSH) Social Justice Award for her commitment to promoting diversity and social justice work, and she is a 2017 Wasserstein Public Interest Fellow.

After graduating from law school, **Gemma Daggs** (2006) started her career as a deputy district attorney in Alameda County. “I loved being a DA,” she says. “It was my dream job.” But when an “opportunity landed in my lap,” she took the leap and now is litigation counsel at Square, the company that created the ubiquitous credit card readers. A grateful scholarship recipient, she is paying it forward by providing pro bono workshops on immigration, serving on a board for a music and arts program, and partnering with the criminal justice bar to educate people on their rights. “It’s important to serve where I live,” she says.

A refugee who came to the United States from Vietnam in the 1980s, **Doan Nguyen** (2004) knew at an early age she wanted to be an attorney. “I grew up helping my parents and community members access legal services and benefits,” she says. “The scholarship allowed me to focus on my studies and internships, enabled me to follow my passion of public interest work.”

Nguyen worked in a number of part-time jobs and internships, with a focus on domestic violence and immigration. Postgraduation, she worked as a JDC staff attorney, where she managed a program that helped nonprofit organizations, and as an Equal Justice Works AmeriCorps Legal Fellow at OneJustice. For the past two years, she has worked at the State Bar of California’s



Shawn Tillis

“We push and push on the door, we think we broke it down,” he says, “but it’s that someone on the other side finally opened it.”

Legal Services Trust Fund Program, which manages and distributes funds to legal aid organizations.

“The scholarship program was not just financial support,” she says. “People followed up on me, kept in touch. I had people who really believed in me.”

A five-year-old **Shawn Tillis** (1998) told his mom he would be a lawyer. “I wanted to be powerful, like the lawyers I saw on TV,” he says. “I was serious!” His determination to feel safe and protect others never wavered. Tragically, he was unable to protect his mother, who was murdered while Tillis was completing his law school applications. He was struggling to finance his education and attending court for his mother’s murder. “It was just too much,” he says, until he received the scholarship, funded by a donor who chose to remain anonymous.

An associate at Winer, McKenna & Burritt, Tillis serves on the board of the Alameda–Contra Costa Trial Lawyers Association (ACCTLA). In 2016, as editor of the organization’s magazine, *The Verdict*, he challenged readers to submit articles about improving diversity in the legal profession. “I want people to be hopeful,” Tillis says. “If you can imagine better, it pulls you up.”

Today he reflects on how the scholarship program affected him and others. “We push and push on the door, we think we broke it down,” he says, “but it’s that someone on the other side finally opened it.”

Yes, the Money Helps, and...

While the scholarship money addresses practical needs, the program also provides emotional support. “People who didn’t even know me before were cheering for me, saying, ‘You can do this! If you need us, let us know,’” Lopez says.

Many of the recipients were the first in their families to attend college, and then law school, and found themselves in unfamiliar and intimidating environments. “I didn’t grow up in the legal field; it was all very new to me,” says Nguyen. JDC staff and BASF members consistently offered encouragement and advice. “It’s like having a family here in California,” says Jackson.

In recent years, recipients have been paired with mentors who answer questions and provide guidance. Often it’s as “small” as reaching out through an email or phone call, helping improve students’ writing, or inviting them to events, in the process teaching necessary skills. “Networking is hard,” says Linares. “It made me uncomfortable, talking with other people. I really didn’t know how.”

Many of those mentors became long-term fixtures in their scholars’ lives. “He not only sponsored me,” says Jackson of Richard Zitrin, “he is a friend, advisor, and mentor.” It’s had a huge impact on the students to continue to have the support of people who believed in them from the beginning, and who can help them navigate the industry as they build their careers. “As a law student, I knew what I wanted to do, but I didn’t know the journey, the challenges,” says Daggs. “It’s especially important for a female of color to have that narrative pushing you forward.” She adds, “It’s a testament to the program that I remember specific words of encouragement fifteen years later.”

Why They Give

The number of scholarships available depends on how much money is donated. Some donors contribute funds from foundations or with a group, such as partners in a law firm, while others choose to give anonymously. “You helped me become who I am today,” Tillis says to his anonymous donor. “I would not have gone to law school. You tipped the scale in the other direction.”

“The financial blessing is a huge thing for people who don’t come from means,” says Daggs, and there’s a larger impact for the legal community. “Students of color and low-income



Gemma Daggs

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come to law school with the desire to change the world,” says Trang, “then they are hit with ginormous loans that become a detriment to going back to their communities.” An investment in this program raises those voices, empowers those future advocates and community leaders. “The JDC program is especially effective because so much time and energy go into considering the stories of the applicants, who otherwise wouldn’t be able to go to law school,” says Stuart Plunkett of Baker Botts. “When I review applicants, I look for not just who I am helping, but who they will help in the future.”

“The issue of minority participation has always been very important to me because I don’t believe that we actually have an equal society,” says Zitrin, who endowed the Shanna Bradford Scholarship through the Arthur and Charlotte Zitrin Foundation in memory of his first scholar. “This program goes back twenty years. Now we have a greater understanding [that] things *haven’t* gotten so much better.”

Zitrin did the math for a 2002 article for *The Recorder* (“A Challenge to San Francisco Law Firms” September 13, 2002) and says contributing to this program will cost pennies a day. “These scholarships are as affordable to our law firms as much as law school is *unaffordable* to the recipients,” he wrote. By giving, “you get to be part of advancing the goals we so treasure in this city—tolerance, acceptance, and nurturing of cultural differences and diversity.”

“I’m a firm believer that one of the great attributes of the legal profession, particularly in the Bay Area, is diversity,” says Plunkett. “The only way to ensure it continues is to make sure we are constantly paying attention to the

pipeline of talent and providing scholarships to minority law students.”

For information about the Bay Area Minority Law Student Scholarship Program, contact Ann Murphy, director of Diversity Pipeline Programs, at amurphy@sfbar.org.

To make a donation, contact Steve Love, director of Donor and Community Engagement, at slove@sfbar.org or 415-782-8917.

More information about both the program and donating is available online at www.sfbar.org/scholarships.

Kathleen Guthrie Woods lives on a one-block San Francisco street that boasts a mix of cultures, languages, orientations, and family structures. “It’s a picture of diversity at its beautiful best,” she says.

BAY AREA MINORITY LAW STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

BY THE NUMBERS 2017

75

Number of applications received

4

New scholarships awarded

2:1

Ratio of female to male applicants

12%

Percentage of minority partners in San Francisco law firms (a 5% increase since 2004)

26%

Percentage of minority associates in San Francisco law firms (a 4.3% increase since 2004)

8

Number of law schools participating:

Berkeley Law; UC Hastings College of the Law; UC Davis School of Law; Golden Gate University School of Law; University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law; Santa Clara University School of Law; Stanford Law School; and University of San Francisco School of Law

\$30,000

Amount of each scholarship, divided over three years

WWW.SFBAR.ORG/SCHOLARSHIPS

Congratulations TO THE 2017 RECIPIENTS OF THE BAY AREA MINORITY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM!



Ramon Becerra-Alcantar
UC Hastings College of the Law



Ana Orozco Cortez
UC Davis School of Law



Lucy Garcia
UC Hastings College of the Law



Anna Rodriguez
Berkeley Law

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