

My grandmother left me treasures. As a teenager, I remember pulling the box containing these treasures out of my closet, and opening it to the earthy, cedar smell of old paper. There they were in her methodical handwriting, our greatest heirlooms: annotated family trees. The trees told the stories of family members who lived centuries ago. The first was Julia Oliver, born into slavery in 1796. Julia often spoke of “the night the stars fell” in 1833, when a meteor shower emblazoned southern skies with shooting stars that appeared to be crashing down to earth.

As Dr. Cornel West said, “our roots determine our routes.” My grandmother’s treasures aided me in the illumination of both. From these historical documents I realized that throughout American history, my family has pursued higher education and used our skills to advance the Black community. I grew up regularly visiting my mother’s pre-K classrooms when she was a public-school teacher in a predominantly Black neighborhood. She instilled in me a deep appreciation of the power of education when she spoke of students who could only afford to eat at school, and how a strong educational foundation can help lift a family out of poverty. Her values mirror those of my great-great grandmother, Kate Bradley Stovall, who founded the Southern California Alumni Association to promote higher education in the Black community. From my grandmother researching Black women’s health to her uncle offering free medical services to his neighbors during the Great Depression, I see the legacies of education and service deeply rooted in my bloodline.

This family background shaped my mission to serve others. I began my mission at a majority-white international boarding school, where serving in leadership positions made me a voice for Black students on campus and gave me a platform to speak about issues that predominantly affect marginalized groups. James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Ta-Nehisi Coates

gave me the language to articulate how systemic racism continues to plague the Black community. Their writing inspired me to attend Howard University. I was attracted to the institution's legacy for producing Black thought leaders. While at Howard, I was determined to prepare myself to address the greatest challenges of my generation, such as mass incarceration, police brutality, and voter suppression. My various work experiences have helped me confirm the law will be my mechanism of change.

After completing college, I worked as an organizer at Civic Nation, where I created the digital infrastructure for voter registration campaigns aimed at building political power in communities of color. In addition to digital organizing, I joined the legislative advocacy team where I lobbied for the passage of federal voting rights bills like the For The People Act. These experiences helped me build my organizing, critical thinking, and writing skills and set the foundation for my legal career. Working in the voting rights space exposed me to the dire stakes of voter suppression and attacks on democracy. I will use the legal tools I'm learning at Yale to work to protect these civil rights that are currently being actively litigated, rights that were hard-fought by folks like my ancestors.

The summer before matriculating at Yale, I experienced what practicing social justice work as an attorney is like. As a Sponsors for Educational Opportunity (SEO) fellow at Jenner & Block LLP, I spoke with lawyers in the Election Law & Redistricting practice group to hear what it is like to work on voting rights issues daily. I had the privilege of joining the Post-Dobbs Decision Task Force where I researched statements made by conservative attorney generals on federal overreach in the context of healthcare decisions, in anticipation of the inconsistent prosecutions they will then pursue of women seeking abortion access. I also did pro-bono work with the Innocence Project and

was introduced to the post-conviction litigation process. I plan on using this experience as a student in the Challenging Mass Incarceration clinic at Yale.

Receiving the Dr. J. Clay Smith Jr. scholarship would help me achieve these goals by supporting my cost of living as a student, therefore decreasing the amount of time I spend working to support myself outside of school. I have reached out to library officials to inquire about working during the spring semester, drove for UberEATS, and requested supplemental loans once this semester. The stress of requesting extra loans and working significant hours during the school year would hinder my ability to participate in clinics and extracurricular activities aimed at developing my skills as a civil rights lawyer. As a scholarship recipient, I would be able to focus less on the logistics of supporting myself and more on my evolving capacity to assist others. In 1992, Dr. J. Clay Smith Jr. inspired black lawyers to “join in the search and agitate for justice because until justice is available to everyone, peace is deferred to all.” I seek to use the same legal system that enslaved and segregated my ancestors as a tool to search and agitate for justice. By doing this, I will honor my family *and* better our country. Those who came before me turned their backs into bridges for me to walk across and act. Now, it is my turn.