

The Texas Lawbook

Free Speech, Due Process and Trial by Jury

Once Alone, Now Empowered

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May 2018 UNT Dallas College of Law graduation. (Left to Right) Founding Dean Royal Furgeson, Ashley Jones Wright and Judge Derbha Jones, Ashley's mother.

I grew up in a rather diverse school district and never felt out of place until I had AP English, where I was one of few Black students. For the first time, I felt uncomfortable around people I considered friends.

Not because they did anything wrong but because I became aware that my Blackness would somehow make me a mouthpiece for the Black experience with every cultural novel we read. I wanted no part of that.

So I refused to read classic novels that would require me to hear the N-word read aloud or lead to class discussions where I was looked at to be the voice for the entire Black population. I figured it was safer for me to opt out of the assignment than suffer through the discomfort.

Now, I am a Big Law associate. One of two Black lawyers in my office. In many ways, I am back in that high school English class—looking around the room to a sea of faces that do not look like me.

This time, however, I am not uncomfortable. I do not take the alternative assignment. I embrace the opportunity and recognize the

magnitude of being a Black female associate in Big Law, especially one who graduated from UNT Dallas College of Law.

But my comfort in this did not happen overnight. It was cultivated by seeing others who look like me navigate the legal field and exude confidence even when they may have been the only Black lawyers in the room. And while it may seem cliché, it started with my mother.

Ashley Jones Wright is a complex commercial litigation associate in the Dallas office of Winston & Strawn LLP. She is a former high school English teacher and Teach for America alum and proud graduate of the inaugural evening class at UNT Dallas College of Law.

After 20 years in the medical field, she decided to go to law school as a wife and mother while working full-time. For over 15 years, she ran a successful solo practice before taking the bench. Her path showed me the power of hard work and resilience. Before her, I had never met a Black attorney and because of her, I knew I could

accomplish the same if I desired.

Now, out of rebellion, I took the long road to law school, opting to join Teach for America instead. In my role as a teacher, it was important for my students to see me as an example of what they could accomplish and more. Just like I had my mother as an example, I wanted to be an example for my students of what they could achieve. So when



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- like mother, like daughter - I decided to go to law school as a mom and wife, while still teaching full-time, I took my students on the law school journey with me. And for some, a school field trip to the law school and to meet a Black female judge inspired them to pursue a career in law. One of those students is now a student at UNT Dallas College of Law.

On this journey, I have had the privilege of being mentored and sponsored by a diverse group of attorneys, judges, and professors who have spoken my name in rooms I could not have imagined and allowed me to participate in forums that otherwise would have been unknown to me. I owe it to them, myself, and future Black attorneys to walk into rooms with head held high, knowing that I deserve to be there.

I will be honest. Being a Black associate in Big Law comes with its internal struggles like the self-imposed weight of perfectionism to ensure I do not "ruin" it for others, or the fear that someone will diminish all of my qualifications - an experienced former educator, magna cum laude law school graduate, and federal judicial clerk - to merely being a "diversity hire." It's not always easy, but I am grateful for the experiences I have had as a Black female attorney.

To my Black colleagues: Do not shy away from an opportunity merely because the faces on the website do not look like yours. If not you, then who? The journey may begin with

you, and your positive experience can draw others in. That said, culture is everything. Find a firm that makes you feel welcome, provides you substantive opportunities for professional growth, and advocates for you when you are not in the room.

To the law firms: Time to revise your list. You cannot diversify by relying on your typical "checklist" for the ideal candidate. That list has not been effective in pushing forward diversity in the past. It is time to apply a different balancing test. Excellence should still be the standard, but the checklist must be modified if you truly desire to make a change. If someone had not been willing to modify the list to include a strong candidate from a newly formed law school, I would not be where I am today.

Our profession cannot be an expansion of my high school classroom, as the communities we serve deserve more and it makes sound business sense to diversify. But it will take all of us to make significant strides across all sectors. Until then, I will continue to lend my voice and experience to diversity efforts because, unlike my high school self, I can no longer silence myself for comfort. Those before me expect more and those coming after me deserve more.