

Black History Month Program Features Q&A with Olympic Medalist Ibtihaj Muhammad



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Winston's Diversity & Inclusion Committee and Black Lawyers Network affinity group were pleased to present a Black History Month celebration on February 6 featuring [Ibtihaj Muhammad](#), an entrepreneur, activist, speaker, and Olympic medalist in fencing. The engaging and entertaining program was live in Los Angeles and broadcast to all U.S. and Europe offices.

LA Office Managing Partner [Eva Davis](#) welcomed the 450+ firm members, clients, and alumni in attendance. Director of Diversity & Inclusion [Sylvia James](#) moderated a Q&A with Ibtihaj about her journey to becoming an important figure in the global discussion of equality and the importance of sports.



Ibtihaj is widely known for being the first Muslim American woman to wear a hijab while competing for the United States in the Olympics. “Islam is a way of life for me,” she told attendees. She said she didn’t realize the power of her hijab and color of her skin to change how she was treated until she stepped out of her accepting community and into the world of fencing.

Intrigued by the idea of using sport to fund a college education, Ibtihaj discovered fencing at age 12 when she saw a team practicing in the school cafeteria. Her mother said “they’re covered, so you have to try it,” and the rest is history. Ibtihaj earned a dual major in International Relations and African Studies from Duke University, where she was a three-time All-American in fencing.

She said she was never deterred by the lack of diversity on her high school team, but was only able to envision herself as an Olympian after witnessing large-scale minority involvement in fencing at the Peter Westbrook Foundation. “Qualifying for the Olympics is the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” Ibtihaj told attendees. A typical day would start with a run, then an intense morning workout, afternoon fencing training, and eight to ten practice matches at night.



In addition to the physical challenges of elite competition, Ibtihaj had to overcome performance anxiety and depression stemming from the implicit and explicit biases of many coaches and teammates. Because I was black, because I was a Muslim, because I was a woman, “I had to combat stereotypes in everything I did.” Writing her cathartic memoir *PROUD: My Fight for an Unlikely American Dream* provided a platform for Ibtihaj to call out the “mean girl energy” she experienced and improve the environment for future Olympians.

Co-founding [Athletes for Impact](#) and serving as an ambassador with the U.S. Department of State’s Empowering Women and Girls through Sport initiative are other ways Ibtihaj uses her platform to help other people. “Athletes shouldn’t feel deterred from using their voices,” she said. This unapologetic activism landed Ibtihaj on *Time* magazine’s 2016 “100 Most Influential” list and inspired the first hijabi Barbie as part of Mattel’s “Shero” line of dolls.

This Heritage Month program was part of Winston’s annual series that celebrates the diversity that exists at the firm and helps foster an inclusive work environment. Visit our [Diversity & Inclusion](#) page for more information.

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