

## **Mentorship for Solidarity**

Teachers falsely labeled my brother a gang member in the fifth grade, and by high school he spent more of his adolescence incarcerated than in classes. Meanwhile, I was pushed from one advanced classroom to the next and prepared for college along the way. We were raised by the same single mother in a welfare-dependent household, we attended the same schools, and yet one major difference in our stories were the teachers who were willing to invest in me at every step of my education.

The mentors that shaped me from a young age into the woman I am today also inspired me to be a role model and confidant for others. As I benefited from elders investing in me, I continually invested in youth through formal programs and organic relationships. Mentorship has been part of my leadership praxis and my calling for over a decade, and in the last two years has been the core component of my job as a leadership program coordinator.

Being an alumna of the Act Six leadership and scholarship initiative, it has been an honor to come full circle in my educational journey by now providing leadership training and support to current students. These students, united by a commitment to bettering their communities, come from an array of urban and adverse environments. As their mentor, I get to hear their stories and understand what motivates them, building intimate relationships with each scholar. In this role, I learn about each of their leadership and professional goals, connect them to resources, and hold them accountable in accomplishing their ambitions. Best of all, I empower them to actualize their potential as mentors for the next class of scholarship recipients in our network. This framework for individualized development that emphasizes communal wellbeing and considers all aspects of a person's identity and ambitions, is precisely the mentorship expertise I will bring to law school. In addition, this same model has been integral in the relationships I have built with the mentors who have guided me towards advocacy and public service.

Doug Smith is one of those mentors. I knew I would attend law school when I first heard him speak at a conference on legal advocacy in Spokane, Washington. At the conference, he shared how he wrote the senate bill legalizing street vending in California as a part of his work with Los Angeles Latinx organizers. This grassroots, community driven approach to law stirred my heart and instantly attracted me toward movement lawyering. Since then, I have sought countless opportunities to learn more about his professional journey. He told me about UCLA Law's Epstein program that he was a part of in law school and he connected me with others in his network--including a professor at UCLA who wrote the first textbook on public interest law. This type of guidance from leaders with legal backgrounds and social justice aspirations not only offer me insight into the work I am interested in, but refine my vision for my own vocation. This, I have found, is the true importance of professional mentorship. With the backdrop of a mentor's life experience, students can add color to the image they paint of their own futures. When nurtured by the wisdom of those who came before, we grow beyond the limits of our own individual imagination and gain vibrant sources of hope, motivation, and accountability.

Beyond the personal and developmental significance, mentorship is a critical aspect of capacity building and collective agency for those committed to broader societal change. For attorneys entrenched in efforts supporting marginalized communities, mentorship becomes a medium for unification and solidarity. Mentors must prepare successors to inherit skills, community relationships, and influence, so they can step into leadership roles with the trust of constituents and the insight of predecessors. Among public interest and movement lawyers, setting an example is not about individual achievement but about communal progress. For us, the success of our work heavily relies on the success of the mentorship within it.

This fall, I will be entering UCLA as a part of the Epstein Public Interest Law and Policy (PILP) program, in which mentorship is woven into the overall mission with cross-year and faculty mentorship already assigned to me. However, PILP's mentorship structure only serves 25 out of the 200 students in each class. Leveraging this structure will equip me with insight to encourage others to seek the same scope of mentorship, or to facilitate those connections myself. Among my PILP peers, I will set a strong example and hold them accountable for being intentional mentors within and outside of our program. When I am in my second and third years, I will prioritize pouring into students with related goals and similar backgrounds as me. Specifically, I look forward to leading in our Black Law Student Association, which will be another avenue for mentorship.

Still, it is not enough to only mentor students who have already made it to law school. For that reason, I will strive to support college students considering law school. I would love to spearhead an initiative through BLSA to connect undergraduates from underrepresented backgrounds with current law students, and bolster the capacity of my peers to invest in the next generation. I will eagerly bring my background in leadership development and critical mentorship to the landscape of law school, where I can encourage others to reach their full potential both as mentors and as mentees.

After law school, I will continue to pay forward by uplifting people in pursuit of a more just society. In the fight for equal justice it will always be necessary to enlist allies and empower emerging leaders. For this reason, I am passionate about joining bar association commissions and boards that lead initiatives to increase diversity in the legal field. Supporting law students will be a part of my mission both during school and for years to come, so that I can offer to others what was generously afforded to me.