

Stephen Alexander Neilson

Ben Crump Law School Scholarship Essay

I know from first-hand experience the power that can derive from strong mentorship. As a teenager, in the absence of my father, it was the wisdom and guidance of my basketball coach that propelled me toward excellence in athletics and in life. While I was a student at Morehouse College, I benefited significantly under the tutelage of my mentors, older brothers, and sisters on campus. There is also power in merely witnessing what is possible for those that come from a similar background as you. I believe that that dynamic is one of the more unspoken elements of Morehouse that makes it all the more special. At Morehouse, I saw so many older students, who were Black men like me and could identify with my experiences, achieve so many remarkable things. As I look back on it now, I can affirm that just seeing it was so impactful for me. I also was amazed and took lessons from the older students at the college who pursued remarkable opportunities and fell short of achieving them, only to get up and pursue their greatness once again. It was powerful for me to witness this when I did. I eventually developed the aspiration to attend Harvard Law School while a freshman at the college. It was such a big dream for a kid who never accomplished anything significant in the classroom and was a truant just two years prior. But at Morehouse, I commonly saw my peer-mentors dream big so I began to follow and dream big too. I have been given so much, even from people I never met. Yet now as an incoming student at Harvard Law School, it is not enough to pay homage alone – as it is incumbent on me to pay it forward for those that follow after me and lift as I continue to climb.

The unfortunate reality of the legal field is that it is the least diverse profession in the United States and largely has throughout the history of this nation. We need more lawyers of color. The legal field has its set of roadblocks to entry that make it harder for minority populations, especially African-American people, to be represented in the way they should. In

light of this, I decided to combat this reality this summer before law school. This summer, I will be an LSAT Teaching Assistant for the TRIALS Pre-Law program, a cost-free LSAT Intensive program for high-achieving students from underrepresented backgrounds in the law, conducted by the Advantage Testing Foundation, in partnership with NYU and Harvard Law School. In this role, I will make the expertise I amassed on the LSAT accessible for others.

Law School provides multiple opportunities for students to give back to the greater community and to pour back into the local youth. In my first year at Harvard Law, I will join and encourage my classmates to join a student-led organization called Dear Future Colleague as a Mentor. Dear Future Colleague is an organization that seeks to address inequality in educational opportunity by providing free support to underrepresented students applying to graduate school and to competitive undergraduate and graduate scholarships. While the American education system is often referred to as a meritocracy, pervasive systemic barriers tied to race, socioeconomic status, disability, and level of parental education prevent applications from being a level playing field. DFC provides mentorship, support, and encouragement to underrepresented applicants, with the hope that these applicants will join our professional ranks - diversifying our career fields in a way that benefits ourselves, our professions, and the broader world. As a DFC mentor, I will volunteer my time to help various students prepare for their applications.

One of the ways I intend to look after my classmates as we navigate the challenges that come about in the intense law school environment is to seek to implement a peer-to-peer system that allows students to check-in amongst themselves to see how we are all doing and dealing with school. I believe the benefits that will come from such a system will be in community-building that will foster success and well-being for all involved. Law school is a place where life-long personal friendships are made and collegiality is fomented.

Receiving mentorship while in law school is something to be coveted for many reasons. For starters, the legal profession is a complex, constantly evolving field that can be very arduous to navigate on one's own. This likely to be compounded when one comes from a background where lawyers are not prevalent. Law school puts you in a unique position that allows you to pour into others as you are actively being poured into. I will embrace this throughout my time in law school.

There are a considerable number of advantages that come with having a solid mentor while in law school. Navigating the perils of law school as well as the later challenges that come with becoming a licensed attorney can be very stressful. One of the benefits of having a mentor while in law school is having that support and knowing that you're not alone in those challenging moments in your life. A mentor can also ease the anxieties and stress a law student may be experiencing as a mentor can be a haven that provides them comfort when they need someone to lean on. In law school we are pushed to develop new skills, continually learn new material, and challenge ourselves consistently. In many ways, law school is more of a marathon than a sprint, and having someone who can help guide, advise, and walk you through a problem or towards a goal is a great way to stay on track. A good mentor may outline pathways to your goals that a law student may have not otherwise known existed and provide feedback for a student's given strategy for advancing themselves. For example, a mentor can point you in the right direction where you may otherwise not be heading.

Mentors are exceptionally useful following law school as well. As one transitions into the legal field, many unspoken rules and procedures can be difficult to navigate alone at the start. Moreover, in many aspects, the education you receive through law school curricula may not fully prepare you for the practical aspects of the practice of law. A mentor can smooth that transition

and fill in the gaps where needed to ensure an even more productive working experience for a young lawyer. A mentor can also facilitate professional advancement through networking and connections to other attorneys and this can aid a young lawyer in assimilating into the new working environment. Additionally, A mentor can be a valuable sounding board for professional advice and career direction, providing substantial help if a young attorney is looking to make a lateral move into a different practice area. From gaining a mentor, one can obtain the perspective and experience of a seasoned lawyer, while also gaining professional confidence and friendship.

My entire candidacy to law school rests on those who first provided me the opportunity, perspective, and confidence to pursue my dreams. Starting with my grandparents, who lived much of their lives in poverty in Jamaica. Without any formal education, they struggled immensely, yet, made it a point to get their kids to America so that their descendants could have opportunities that they never had any semblance of access to. I am grateful for them and the sacrifices that they encumbered that permitted me the chance to be a legal advocate and force in my community

Moreover, as I continue to think about this prompt and my journey into the legal field, I also am compelled to consider and revere the tens of thousands of Black attorneys who came before me, who despite experiencing undue hardships and obstacles, dismantled barriers and paved the way for my generation of attorneys to both have the opportunity and continue the work towards progress that still needs to be made. While they were not direct mentors for me, they have functioned indirectly in this field to show me what is possible. I revere and consider Mr. Heman Marion Sweatt — whose case and advocacy led the Supreme Court to desegregate the University of Texas School of Law, to which I had the opportunity to attend. I also consider and

revere Mr. George Lewis Ruffin, the first Black person to graduate from Harvard Law School, in whose footsteps I will follow.

Mentorship provides law students with the opportunity to be molded into great attorneys who then fight for justice and make a difference in the world and do so with the confidence and boldness derived from an impactful mentoring relationship. In my pursuit to become a legal advocate who empowers the socially disadvantaged in my community, I see myself as having multiple opportunities to develop the skills of future attorneys along the way. We are indeed each other's keepers. With this conviction in mind, it is my honor to pursue my legal education at Harvard Law School and to humbly seek the assistance of the Ben Crump PLLC Scholarship to do so.