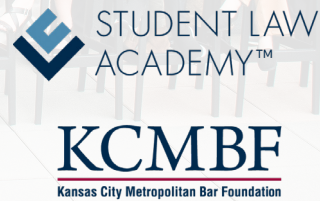




# Everyone Belongs in the “Lawyerly Class”

By Amy Coopman



Did you know you wanted to be a lawyer in high school? I had no idea. No one in my family was a lawyer, I did not know any lawyers, and I did not watch television shows like *L.A. Law*, *Night Court* or *Matlock* (yes, I was a child of the '80s). My summer jobs were not of the legal variety, although I suppose lots of babysitting gave me early practice at mediating disputes between fighting kids.

This summer, 28 Kansas City area high school students might say they knew they wanted to become a lawyer after graduating from the KCMBF Student Law Academy (SLA). The SLA Scholars of 2022 are members of the fourth graduating class of SLA, a program created in 2019 by the Kansas City Metropolitan Bar Foundation (KCMBF), in partnership with The Partnership for Regional Education Preparation-Kansas City (PREP-KC). Recognizing a real need to diversify our legal community, SLA stakeholders are determined to take action and find ways to encourage, develop, and support future lawyers in our community that have been historically under-represented.

## Over-Representation and Under-Representation: The Numbers Don't Lie

Take a moment and think about an event when you were with a bunch of lawyers. Maybe it was the Bench-Bar & Boardroom Conference, an-

other CLE seminar, a court hearing, or a firm meeting. As you form this mental picture, are you seeing people of different ages, genders, races, ethnicities, religions? Are there LGBTQ+ lawyers? Judges with disabilities?

The legal profession has a long way to go in becoming a more diverse workforce. Nationally, law firms are still mostly non-minority, with white males overwhelmingly holding leadership roles, and studies repeatedly show that the percentages of attorneys of color are far smaller than those reflected in national population demographics.<sup>1</sup> White lawyers have been consistently over-represented in the legal profession compared with their presence in the overall U.S. population. In 2021, 85% of all lawyers were non-Hispanic whites yet the overall U.S. population is only 60% non-Hispanic white. White males are even more over-represented (70%) in higher levels of law firm leadership. As the ABA's 2021 "Profile of the Legal Profession" revealed, "nearly all people of color are under-represented in the legal profession compared with their presence in the U.S. population."<sup>2</sup>

These nationwide over-representation and under-representation trends are even wider in the Kansas City metro area. Less than one-third, or 31.8%, of Kansas City-area attorneys at the 83 law firms that responded to a survey for

the Kansas City Business Journal's 2022 Law Firms List are women.<sup>3</sup> Nationally, the ABA reports that 37% of active attorneys are women. Regarding local attorneys of color, just 5.8% are racial or ethnic minorities, whereas the ABA reports the national level for non-Caucasian/white attorneys is 15%. This year, firms reported having 2.1% of Kansas City-area attorneys identifying as LGBTQ+ compared to 3.3% nationally.<sup>4</sup> The number of lawyers at American law firms who report having disabilities remains small – slightly less than 1% of all lawyers, and disability data has not been tracked locally.<sup>5</sup>

## Barriers and Bottlenecks

Reflect for a moment on the legal television shows of my youth. *L.A. Law*, *Night Court* and *Matlock* all featured mostly white casts. Judges and senior attorneys were for the most part white males with occasional nods to diversity in other roles.<sup>6</sup> These shows reinforced a culture where women are generally not in charge, people of color are limited to supporting roles, and people with disabilities are included even less frequently. Has our culture really changed much in the last several decades? In American legal culture, under-represented high school students become under-represented college and law students who become under-represented associates who become under-represented partners and judges.

<sup>1</sup> ABA Profile of the Legal Profession 2020, Ch. 3, p.13.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* (4.7% of all lawyers were Black in 2021, while the U.S. population is 13.4% Black; 4.8% of all lawyers were Hispanic in 2021, but the U.S. population is 18.5% Hispanic; 2.5% of all lawyers were Asian in 2021 even though the U.S. population is 5.9% Asian; .4% of lawyers are Native American while the overall U.S. population is 1.3% Native American).

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Vaupel, How KC Area Law Firms Rank for Diversity, KAN. CITY BUS. J., Jan. 21, 2022, <https://www.bizjournals.com/kansascity/news/2022/01/21/list-extra-law-firms-diversity-dei-efforts.html>

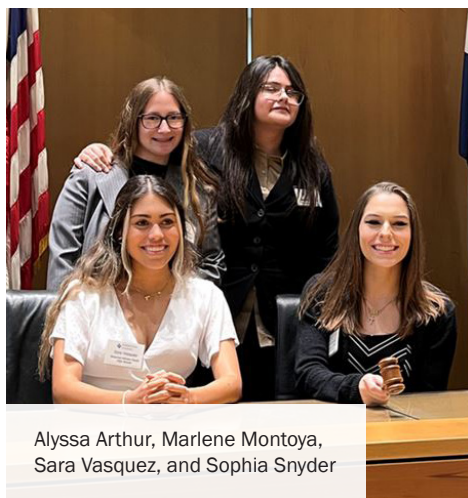


SLA's stakeholders recognize that the barriers and bottlenecks along the way only compound the problem. They understand that "[t]here is no single reason for our profession's stubborn lack of diversity. Instead, a multitude of factors, including systemic racism and sexism, unconscious bias, and law firm structures, contribute to this problem."<sup>7</sup>

According to The Honorable Christine Arguello, District Judge for U.S. District Court for the District of Colorado, a primary obstacle is that under-represented students are blocked from opportunities to become better law school candidates:

*They lack the knowledge or social capital necessary to, for example, secure the right internship, emphasize strengths on a resume, or approach the right college professor about a letter of recommendation. This obstacle can, in part, be a function of poverty. But more often, it is derived from something similar to what happened to me in high school. Our [under-represented students] are turned from the law school path because someone decides that they do not fit the mold of what a lawyer looks like. And so they do not get the right internships, have trouble creating common ground with the professor, or are constantly questioned about the wisdom of pursuing a profession in which there are few people who look like them.<sup>8</sup>*

Judge Arguello describes the second obstacle as far more pernicious: "It's internalizing a message to the [students] that they do not belong in the lawyerly class . . . [telling] you that, given where you've come from, any success is just a fluke, a mistake, or a short-term thing."<sup>9</sup>



Alyssa Arthur, Marlene Montoya, Sara Vasquez, and Sophia Snyder



Eric Sherrod, Jr., Donte Williams, Charlie Hernandez Cardoza, Kateryn Torres-Diaz, Eric Martinez, and Samantha Aguilar

The "lawyerly class" needs to become more diverse, not just because it is the right thing to do, but because a legal profession that is less diverse than the population bound by its laws weakens the rule of law. "[I]t is the perception of the general population that only an elite and moneyed few have the ability to join the ranks of the legal profession, and these are the people who write and enforce our laws. The perception of inequity in our justice system erodes the fundamental principle—etched in stone above the entrance to our highest court—that we can all expect 'equal justice under the law.'"<sup>10</sup>

### The SLA Pipeline

Energy politics aside, let's consider pipelines for a moment. A pipeline carries resources, usually natural gas or oil, over vast distances from remote locations to the populated places where we need the products. In the legal profession, there is a similar need to connect our diverse lawyers of the future to the law firms and courthouses where they are needed. And they are truly needed.

SLA aspires to be that pipeline to diversify Kansas City's legal community. Its mission is to provide underserved urban high school students meaningful exposure to careers in the legal profession and a broad overview of the legal system. SLA is structured in three segments: (1) Legal Pathway; (2) Job Shadow paid internship; and (3) Pre-Law Fellowship. The Legal Pathway segment offers an introduction to different areas of the law in their first year of the program through short presentations and learning sessions conducted by local attor-



Laila Atkins and SLA Graduation Keynote Speaker, Irene Caudillo, President and CEO of El Centro, Inc.

neys, judges, and other legal professionals. It also connects Scholars with mentors through weekly lunches. The Job Shadow segment in their second SLA year offers Legal Pathway graduates an opportunity to connect with additional mentors, receive resume drafting and building advice, shadow law firms, courts, and government offices and participate in a mock trial. Finally, the Pre-Law Fellowship bridges scholars from high school through law school by providing access to an LSAT prep course, provides financial support for law school application and bar exam costs, and offers additional mentoring support.

4, 9, 10 *Id.*

5 ABA Profile of the Legal Profession 2020, Ch. 3, p.16.

6 (i.e., Jimmy Smits' Latino male associate and Larry Drake's clerk who is developmentally disabled on *L.A. Law*, Marsha Warfield's African American female bailiff on *Night Court*, and Kene Holliday and Clarence Gilyard Jr. as African American male private investigators on *Matlock*).

7 Sybil Dunlop & Jenny Gassman-Pines, *Why the Legal Profession Is the Nation's Least Diverse (and How to Fix It)*, Vol. 47 MITCHELL HAMLINE L. REV., 129 (2021).

8 Christine Arguello, *A Pipeline to Success: Law School...Yes We Can Increase Diversity in the Legal Profession*, AMICUS, Fall 2020, at 24, 25. August 2022 | KC Counselor 9



SLA is so much more than just a program to inform students about the law. What makes SLA effective is that it supports and encourages students with the positive message that they really do belong in the “lawyerly class.” Nyla Taylor, East High School Junior and SLA Class of 2022 graduate offers the following advice to future Scholars: “Don’t second guess or doubt yourself. If you are interested in the legal field, don’t let others’ doubts or your doubts stop you. You can do it.” Sharra Wagner, KCMBF Director, echoes Taylor’s message:

*These Scholars’ past life experiences often teach them there are limits, both external and self-imposed, that create barriers to even conceiving of dreams. They may have never seen an attorney who looks like them. They may have never dared to dream they could go to law school, to pass the bar exam, to become a judge. The legal community plays an important and profound role in letting the Scholars know, “You can do it: you can be a lawyer and you belong here. A welcoming legal community is here waiting for you to join us.”*

A true measure of SLA’s success is when its graduates have confidence that they can become valuable and valued members of our le-



Job Shadow Scholars Luna Marin and Myuah Hamilton with Leda Gipson of Lexitas

gal community. Please consider supporting SLA with your time (making a Legal Pathway presentation, offering job shadowing, and/or being a mentor) and financial support (donating to the Pre-Law Fellowship). With your help, we can make real progress in building a stronger and more diverse Kansas City legal community.■

Scan here to learn more about the 2022 scholars



### About the Author



**Amy Coopman** is the owner of Bridge Mediation, LLC and conducts mediations on a wide range of civil matters. Amy serves on the KCMBF Board of Directors and chairs the Student Law Academy Committee. In her spare time, Amy supports efforts to mentor new mediators and develop student-led mediation programs in secondary and post-secondary education.



SLA Job Shadow Scholars, all graduates of the SLA Legal Pathway from previous years, visiting the Missouri Court of Appeals - Western District. From L to R: Keva Gorman (PREP-KC), Luna Marin (Class of 2021), Rysie Martin (Class of 2020), Jouhel Salinas (Class of 2021), Kyler Richard (Class of 2019), Myuah Hamilton (Class of 2019), Aurora Ritter (Class of 2021), Yvonn Razo-Alatorre (Class of 2021), Maddison Cunningham (Class of 2021), Vanessa Rodriguez (Class of 2019), Nejmadin Ahmed (Class of 2021), and Sharra Wagner (KCMBF).