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BOSTON COLLEGE | LAW

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Vanessa Lawrence: Out From The Corner

Vanessa Lawrence, a Rappaport Fellow? Five years ago, she would have laughed at the notion. But her sisters knew better.

It was 2015, and fresh out of Deer Park High School on Long Island, Vanessa was ready to join her four older siblings in the work force. College had not been the choice for them, or for earlier generations of the family, and Vanessa — the self-described “quiet person in the corner who didn’t really talk” — took for granted that she would be no different.

But Tracey and Lisa knew better. “You are the one,” Vanessa remembers them telling her. “We *need* you to do this.”

So, she did. Colgate University ’19, to Boston College Law School, and look at her now: Vanessa Lawrence, Rappaport Fellow.

At 23, she has a worldview shaped by her layered identity — working-class upbringing, first-generation college student, woman of color — a worldview that shapes her interest in a future as a civil rights attorney.

“I see myself in the work,” she says, yet when she arrived at B.C. Law a year ago, she had never even met a lawyer. Then came her opportunity for the Rappaport Fellowship, with its internship, financial support, mentors, access to a wide range of weekly speakers, and something from which Vanessa would have shied away in the past: a platform.

“I never thought I would be in this position, but now that I’m here I intend to use it,” she said. “The Fellowship allows me a chance to share my story, which might resonate with someone else with a similar story, and I can pull them up and bring them into it. I’ve had to come out of my corner.”

And there has been the practical matter of the experience, of course. Vanessa’s internship was her ideal placement, in the Civil Rights Division of the Massachusetts Attorney General’s office.

She sat in on intake meetings with those bringing discrimination claims. She worked alongside civil rights lawyers with a range of styles and areas of expertise. She monitored the different housing court dockets in relation to the state’s eviction moratorium. She wrote a memo for the Police Misconduct Working Group.

For a young woman still undecided where she will end up within civil rights, the breadth of experience packed into a single summer was exactly what she needed. “I’m incredibly grateful to have had this opportunity,” she said. “It was a great chance to help me figure out what’s out there.”

Go figure, the quiet Long Island kid is Co-President of the Black Law Student Association. She helped organize this year’s LAHANAS retreat for incoming first-years at B.C. Law. And yes, she is a Rappaport Fellow.

“I said to my sisters, ‘Can you believe it?’” she said.

“Yeah, of course,” was their answer. “What else did you think would happen?”



– Dave Cummings
davecumplings1967@gmail.com