

NBA High School Intern Program Participants: Where Are They Now?

Tabitha Robinson

The Nashville Bar Association's High School Intern Program is one of the Diversity Committee's largest projects each year. The Program recruits high school students—primarily from Metropolitan Nashville Public School system—for paid summer internships. Interested students complete a rigorous application and interview process with selected Diversity Committee members and successful applicants are paired with participating employers based on their interests. In addition to the internships, selected students complete an eight-week "lunch and learn" series, coordinated each year by members of the Diversity Committee. Through these lunch and learns, students meet judges and the mayor, visit courthouses and law schools, attend panels featuring local attorneys, and more.

For over twenty years, the program has inspired students to pursue a profession in law while forming their foundations for success. It continues to make the legal profession accessible to those who are not afforded traditional paths into the profession. Here are the stories of some of our former Program participants.



Cornell Kennedy, Member at Sherard Roe Voigt & Harbison

When did you know you wanted to be a lawyer?

Probably about two weeks into the NBA High School Diversity Program.

What inspired you?

Prior to the Program I didn't know much about being a lawyer and the legal profession besides what I had occasionally seen on television and that was only trial lawyers. However, during the program I not only experienced the litigation side of law but also the corporate world of the legal profession and from then on knew I wanted to be a transactional lawyer.

How did you hear about the intern Program?

My guidance counselor, Ruth Young, at Whites Creek High School. She informed me about it and how I should apply. I was extremely reluctant to do so, thinking I would not get into the program and decided not to apply. However, she forced me into doing so by giving my grandmother a call. Let's just say after that call . . . I applied. I'll leave it at that! Ha!

Tell us all about your intern placement.

I was placed with Sherrard Roe Voigt & Harbison in the summer of 2000 when I was a rising senior. I attended depositions, mediations, went to a trial and witnessed a few conference calls on corporate transactions. I also worked for many of the staff members and did quite a bit of administrative work (i.e. courthouse filings, courier services, research, mail room/copy center, etc.)

What was your favorite part about the Program?

Being exposed to a professional setting. Prior to the program, I had never been in a professional setting. I enjoyed learning how professionals dress, talk, interact, etc. The experience left a big impression on me.

Tell us what you've been up to since the Program.

Following the program I graduated from high school and decided to take a year off before entering MTSU to save money for college. During that year, Sherrard Roe contacted me about returning to the firm as an office assistant/runner. After that first year, I enrolled in MTSU but continued to work for Sherrard Roe during my entire time in college. I graduated from MTSU in December 2006 and then went on to University of Tennessee College of Law in the fall of 2007. I clerked for Sherrard Roe both of my summers in law school and then joined the firm in 2011 as an associate. In 2019 I launched a new healthcare services group at Sherrard Roe focused on transactional work specifically for dentists, veterinarians, optometrists and other specialty healthcare providers.

You're now a member at Sherrard Roe. Tell us more about your experience.

I was invited to become a partner in January 2021 and it has been a wonderful experience. I am the first African-American partner at my firm and look forward to being a trailblazer for many other diverse attorneys.

Outside of being a lawyer, what do you like to do?

I do a good bit acting and dancing in various community theater plays, festivals, and other shows around town.

What advice would you give a new high school intern thinking about going into the legal profession?

Reach out to as many attorneys and law firms as you can about job shadowing. Even if the opportunities are nonpaid. The experience is invaluable.

Any other thoughts you'd like to share with us?

I would highly encourage employers to consider participating in the Program so that more diverse high schools students have this opportunity. This experience changed the course of my life.



Marina Yousef, 2L at Vanderbilt Law School

When did you know you wanted to be a lawyer? What inspired you?

A few months after my family's immigration to Nashville, Tennessee, my mom started a minimum wage job for a big employer in town. Despite her gratitude for the opportunity, my mom came home crying most nights. At the age of seven, I did not understand what was wrong, but I was determined to help. As I grew older, I learned my mother was suffering from wage theft and employer intimidation -- she was not alone. Looking around I realized that my family's struggles were not unique. Seeing my mother's and community's helplessness sparked my interest in legal advocacy.

How did you hear about the Program?

As a junior at John Overton High School, I met with my assigned career counselor who told me about the opportunity to intern for a lawyer. I was elated because I didn't know any attorneys, and I was excited for the opportunity to "get a taste" of the legal profession.

Tell us all about your intern placement.

I was placed under Yanika Smith-Bartley at Asurion. I was given my own cubicle among the legal assistants and was asked to do various tasks such as sitting in on meetings, creating spreadsheets, and filing documents. Since then, I have stayed connected with Yanika, who helped me tremendously throughout the years, especially as I prepared for on-campus interviewing.

What was your favorite part about the Program?

The lunch-and-learns were my favorite part because I met people with different talents practicing law and gained exposure to the many avenues in the legal profession. Additionally, the Friday lunch-and-learns allowed me to build relationships with other attorneys, who continue to be dear mentors to this day.

Tell us what you've been up to since the Program.

I believe that the Program opened doors that has led me to where I am today. After finishing the internship, I began college at Trevecca Nazarene University. During my freshman year, I reached out to Raquel Oluyemo (who had become my mentor from the internship) asking if she knew of any opportunities for me to work at a firm. She said she didn't, but that she was presenting in front of a large group of legal employers and attorneys about the Program. She invited me to share my story and speak about the importance of the internship with the goal that an employer may recruit me after our presentation. After sharing my story, Barbara Bumbilis from Neal & Harwell recruited me to work as their part-time receptionist. I gladly accepted, and since Spring of 2017, I've worked for Neal & Harwell.

Since then, my NBA and Neal & Harwell mentors have continued to empower me to pursue my dreams. They were with me as I started TISL's moot court competition, they encouraged me as I considered pursuing a position as Chief Justice, and they were there for me as I ran for Student Body President at Trevecca. Because of the relationships I formed and the doors that were opened, I pursued and accepted the opportunity to study at Vanderbilt Law School.

You're in law school at Vanderbilt. Tell us about your experience so far.

The past year and a half, I've learned more than ever before inside and outside the classroom. My professors have been some of the best teachers I've ever learned under. Additionally, through Vanderbilt's George Barrett Social Justice Department, I've been able to practice my legal skills at Tennessee Justice for our Neighbors and TN Coalition against Domestic Violence immigration clinics. During my 1L summer I interned at Harvard's Immigration and Refugee Clinic, and this upcoming summer I'm joining the inaugural K&L Gates summer associate class.

What do you enjoy doing in your free time?

When I am not outlining for my finals, I enjoy wedding planning and furniture shopping. When that's all done, I love going over a friend's house and playing a good game of Settlers of Catan.

What are your plans once you graduate law school?

After graduation, I hope to practice as a transactional attorney in the Nashville legal market that mentored me. Outside of the office, I want to serve the Nashville immigrant community and advocate for them as they continue to pursue their American dream.

What advice would you give a new high school intern thinking about going into the legal profession?

I would tell any high schooler that no opportunity is too small. The smaller doors they choose to walk through today, may open great doors years to come.



Brandon Holt, 1L at Columbia Law School

When did you know you wanted to be a lawyer? What inspired you?

My reasoning for pursuing a career in the law has evolved over time. I first told my family I wanted to be a lawyer when I was ten or eleven. My grandmother and I watched *Legally Blonde* and Elle Woods convinced me that I needed to go to law school. I was captivated by her discipline, authenticity, self-assuredness, and relentless pursuit of justice.

In high school, my mom enrolled me in a few legal exploration programs where I was able to hear and learn more about the substance of a legal career from practicing attorneys. I quickly learned there was more to the law than Elle Woods shared.

I also participated in mock trial, held internships in law and government, and participated in social activism. I was drawn to the elements of advocacy and persuasion in the law. I liked the idea of having a forum to convince others of the efficacy of a particular position, especially a position that could provide a material benefit to marginalized communities. So becoming a lawyer felt very natural.

When I graduated from college, I was exposed to professional opportunities outside of the law and I thought it was important to explore them before I committed to law school. I spent six years in finance and technology, and I learned a lot about business, from sales and strategy to client and relationship management. I enjoyed this work and now my professional interests lie at the intersections of law and transactional business.

I am excited for my burgeoning legal education because I will be able to combine my professional interests with the original reason I pursued the law, which is advocacy for marginalized communities. That work will always be a part of my future practice.

How did you hear about the intern Program?

After I told my mom I wanted to be a lawyer, she was relentless about finding opportunities that would allow me to explore this interest, including the Nashville Bar Association High School Intern Program. The intern program was different from other programs in one distinct and important way: it was a paid opportunity. Most internships, especially for high school students, were not paid. The intern program allowed me to learn and explore the law at a young age without adding any burden to my family. I am always grateful to my mom for supporting and pushing me to pursue any potential passion.

Tell us all about your intern placement.

During my summer in the intern program, I worked at Sherrard, Roe, Voigt & Harbison. I mostly worked with the firm's litigation associates and partners on various matters. The attorneys were very generous about including me in a variety of projects, including discovery and document review, deposition preparation, pleading review, oral argument preparation, and, of course, a lot of indexing and filing. Two of the most memorable experiences were attending a deposition and an appellate oral argument with a couple of the firm's attorneys.

The people at SRVH were, and continue to be, incredibly supportive of me. Outside of the matters on which I worked, one of my favorite memories was when the firm viewed a documentary I created on the Nashville Sit-In Movement for the National History Day Competition. Partners, associates, and staff were genuinely curious and interested in my work. I remember feeling welcomed into SRVH's culture through that experience. It allowed me to create relationships with more people across the firm and broaden my exposure to the firm's work.

What was your favorite part about the Program?

I often think about the lunch-and-learn that the program hosted with Judge Richard Dinkins. As high school students we were given an opportunity to ask questions of and hear from a preeminent jurist and civil rights attorney in a small group environment. I reflect on this experience because it was the first time I learned language that centered legal advocacy for the marginalized groups of which I am a part. I remember feeling inspired by his work and realizing that there was space in the law for me to affect a reimagined society. That felt powerful. My interests in the law have multiplied, but I will always hold the principles of equity and justice that Judge Dinkins shared as guideposts in my eventual practice of the law.

Tell us what you've been up to since the Program.

It has been over 10 years since I was a high school junior in the program. After graduating high school in 2011, I left Tennessee and attended Princeton University in New Jersey. While at Princeton, I studied History and received certificates (or minors) in African-American and Gender & Sexuality Studies. I led and participated in various initiatives on and off campus, including mock trial; advocacy and policy work for Black students and survivors of sexual violence on campus; and criminal justice policy in New Jersey. During my college summers, I interned at the Manhattan District Attorney's Office and at an investment bank, where I eventually kicked off my professional career.

When I graduated from Princeton, I knew I wanted to work and explore more of the professional world before committing to law school. In high school and in college, I worked with many organizations with adjacency to the law, but I wanted to give myself an opportunity to see and do more. I certainly did not expect to take six years before coming back to the law, but I do not regret a single second. In those six years, I spent almost two years working in finance and then settled into a career on the sales and client services sides of technology in New York City.

What prompted you to change careers and go to law school?

Last year provided some stillness that allowed me to seriously reflect on my future. I spent a lot of my teenage years and early twenties thinking that I needed to fit neatly into a single box. As I experienced more of the world, confining myself became increasingly difficult. I ultimately embraced finding a way to balance two things: first, my desire to meaningfully change how marginalized people experience society; and second, my pursuit of a business career that leveraged my previous experiences in finance and technology to work on more complex deals and negotiations. I like how expansive the law is—it does not require me to choose and instead embraces my pursuit of the duality.

You're in law school at Columbia. Tell us about your experience so far.

I am approaching the end of my first semester as a 1L at Columbia Law School. I am taking Constitutional Law, Contracts, Civil Procedure, and Legal Writing and Research. One of the most common refrains about law school is how difficult the first year can be. While it has certainly been an adjustment to return to academia (especially the copious reading and studying) after working, I am really enjoying my time at the law school. The first year of law school is focused on teaching foundational doctrines and black letter law. I am building frameworks to think

deeper about how our society is organized and how the law shapes and influences our most basic and complex relationships. I appreciate the new challenge and perspectives.

How do you spend your time outside of law school?

Law school definitely keeps me busy. One thing that brings me joy outside of law school is maintaining a wellness routine. This looks different depending on the day, but I usually do some combination of strength training, high intensity interval training, yoga, and meditation. This helps me to feel grounded and gives me a bit of clarity as I approach the rigor of academics. I am also surrounded by an amazing community of friends in New York, so I try to make time to spend with them, as well.

What are your plans once you graduate law school?

When I graduate, I plan to start my career at a law firm on the transactional side of corporate law.

What advice would you give a new high school intern thinking about going into the legal profession?

First, I think it is great that you identified a potential interest, especially at this age. One thing I wish I appreciated more when I interned was the true purpose of an internship at your age: exploration. I encourage you to commit to exploration during your internship. There is a myriad of opportunity within the law and there is also expansive opportunity outside of the law. Participating in the internship does not come with any pressure or expectation that you pursue a legal career. Come to the internship with curiosity and a critical lens. Ask questions that give you a sense of whether you can affect your purpose through the legal profession or if another avenue would serve you and your purpose better. Internships are as much about finding out what you enjoy as they are about finding out what you enjoy less.



TABITHA ROBINSON is a staff attorney for Nashville Electric Service. She is a co-chair of the NBA Diversity Committee. She is also a board member for the Lawyer's Association for Women – Marion Griffin Chapter, Women's Political Collaborative of TN, Sister Cities of Nashville, and on the advisory council for W.O. Smith Music School. Tabitha is a graduate of the University of Tennessee College of Law.