

In Their Words: HBCU Law Grads On Finding Their Purpose

By **Emily Lever**

Law360 (March 9, 2023, 4:39 PM EST) -- Only six historically Black law schools are currently operating in the U.S., but alumni tell Law360 Pulse that they punch above their weight, nurturing their students and producing service-oriented lawyers.

More than 100 historically Black colleges and universities, or HBCUs, were founded before the Civil Rights Act to serve Black students who were barred from attending segregated white schools. Today, they continue to be drivers of class mobility and sites of community-building.

In 2020, Black lawyers made up 5% of the profession, a figure that has been unchanged for a decade, according to the American Bar Association. HBCU law schools are leading the charge to change that.

HBCU law schools stand out from the rest in terms of their commitment to supporting students who are caregivers, working full-time on top of law school, struggling financially, first-generation lawyers or switching careers, alumni tell Law360 Pulse. And they do all this with less funding than their predominantly white counterparts.

Five attorneys who graduated from HBCU law schools in the past two decades spoke to Law360 Pulse about the challenges and achievements of their legal careers.



Tanisha Green

Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University class of 2010

Assistant Dean of Student Development at TMSL

Her path to law school:

I had family troubles when I was a teenager, and originally I wanted to go to law school to be an attorney that protected kids. After high school, I was a paralegal in the Air Force for about five years before they granted my request to let me out early to attend law school.

I grew up in Oklahoma and had no exposure to HBCUs. I applied to Thurgood because it was the closest HBCU to family, but it was not near family. And it was a very good decision for me because they became my family.

I had my daughter here with me by myself, and they took care of her just like they took care of me. They made it so easy for me to be a mom and go to school. I would bring her to class and if it was a professor that preferred kids not being in the classroom, they made arrangements for someone to keep her for me. If she came [to class] during the day, she had a place to play and when we came at night someone bought a cot for her to sleep on.

How she approaches her role as dean of students:

We want to understand students and the struggles that they might be dealing with that are not academic, because school is not the only stress factor for our students. This school is very hard to get through, it's a very difficult curriculum, and they do that while also dealing with other issues. And I know that firsthand.

On HBCU funding:

I think that our voices are not heard as loudly as the voices of those who lobby for funding for other institutions. The University of Houston Law Center is less than a half a mile from our institution. We are only separated by a street. It was awarded \$96 million to build a new law school, although TMSL's building is older.

I think that they don't feel that our students need what other institutions need. I wouldn't be able to begin to explain to you why they think that. Our students work hard and they don't deserve to be overlooked.



Kimra Major-Morris

Florida A&M University College of Law class of 2007

Managing partner at intellectual property firm Major-Morris Law LLC

Her path to law school:

I started off as a recording artist, performing at clubs and music conferences. Then I was Bobby Brown's personal assistant for a while. That was rocky, because the music industry was not stable. I moved to South Florida and worked at CNN, at HBO, then started working for BET; I was the official photographer for six years for the Soul Train Awards. At this point it's 2003, I have a 5-year-old and a 9-year-old now, and I'm still trying to figure out who I want to be when I grow up.

When I was 18, I was a records clerk at the federal court in Miami; one of the people that I met was one of the original FAMU law students, Congressman Alcee Hastings [a judge at the time]. I used to

stop by his office all the time and just make small talk. Little did I know that 20 years later, I was gonna be emailing him saying, "Hey, remember me? I live here in Orlando and I think I want to go to school." He wrote one of my recommendation letters. I got into FAMU Law and I was super excited. I was 37 years old.

Her FAMU Law experience

It was the nurturing environment that I really needed. I would bring my girls to school; they were 5 and 9. They were always with me in the library and no one ever said I couldn't bring them; if anything, people were trying to help me babysit. I liked the camaraderie; I didn't feel like I have to be anything other than myself.

You won't graduate FAMU without support, without job references or people referring business to you. There is so much pride in being a Rattler.

Why HBCUs are important:

You may not have any lawyers in your family, so this might be extra hard, and no one's going to look down on you or treat you any differently. It was a relief to be in an environment where I didn't have to deal with the extra weight. These are people who can see the challenge and offer a solution, or offer a little grace if you need that.

When you don't have these places that are going to pay attention to you and your community, then we lose opportunities. Some of the challenges that we face are the direct result of the generational wealth gap. I had classmates who were caregivers at the time to their parents or had two or three jobs. Everybody is not starting at the same place and some people need that special touch.

How her FAMU experience informs her law practice:

I have represented the families of Trayvon Martin, George Floyd and now Tyre Nichols at the intersection of social justice and intellectual property. There were 34 years that passed before we were able to own patents because the Constitution did not recognize Black people as people. This is a really important space if we're going to talk about ownership and monetizing things.

In the case of these families, what I'm doing is helping them to protect, for example, the name of the foundation that they start so that they can stop people setting up apparel shops and making money off of them.

People don't often think of intellectual property and social justice in the same sentence, but it does matter because as soon as these people are killed, the next thing you know, people are filing trademark applications.



Charles Gee

Florida A&M University College of Law class of 2015

Managing partner of personal injury firm Gee & Lee

His path to FAMU Law:

In my community, I didn't see a lot of Black lawyers. There was just one in my hometown. So it seemed like a way that I could serve and represent my community

I grew up in a neighboring town to FAMU's [Tallahassee] campus, in Quincy, Florida. Gadsden County is the only predominantly Black county in the entire state of Florida, so FAMU and that county had a strong relationship. Even if you didn't attend the college, you became a part of the culture. FAMU always felt like home and always felt like family; it was instilled in my community already.

[FAMU Law] was a family atmosphere; it was very nurturing. It was as hard as any other law school, but there was a level of care that I needed that allowed me to become the practitioner that I am. It's also a melting pot of culture and ideas; you probably wouldn't expect that for an HBCU law school, but it was extremely diverse.

How FAMU Law influenced his practice:

FAMU taught me how to serve underrepresented communities with care and understanding. There weren't many lawyers that looked like me in my town, but the same is true for a lot of African American clients; it's their first experience with an African American lawyer.

I saw insurance companies and opposing counsel discount my clients' injuries because they went back to work. But in our communities, we're not used to having something handed to us.

A lot of our clients are struggling to make ends meet. Many are living below the poverty line. If they get a \$5,000 check or a \$7,000 check, that may be the biggest check they've ever seen in their life. That comes with a heightened level of duty. It's an honor and it's a privilege to represent those clients even in cases that most law firms would deem small. Those clients too deserve quality representation.

What is lost when HBCU law schools are underfunded:

Last I checked, about 4.5% of all lawyers were Black. We're missing out on representation for underrepresented communities. You want to make a great change? Then you need to consider a law school like Florida A&M which is trying to produce that change. We're focused on change in these communities rather than getting jobs in BigLaw. Some graduates of FAMU went on to have great jobs in BigLaw — that's a possibility too — but there is a strong focus on serving underrepresented minority communities at FAMU Law that I don't think is there at the typical law school.



Chazle' Woodley

North Carolina Central University School of Law class of 2022

Associate at Ellis & Winters LLP

Why she chose NCCU:

Law school is a place where you're not just getting insight and wisdom on the law, but you are essentially having to talk about things that are happening in culture in order to get an insight into, how does the law really apply? I wanted to be at a law school that has a family environment, that would treat me like family, and I wanted to be a part of a law school that has such a deep history.

NCCU has a great reputation. I'm from North Carolina, and when I found out the history and found out they were founded to help African Americans attend law school because at the time we couldn't attend UNC Chapel Hill, it inspired such a passion in me to attend this school that had endured so much. They struggled to get a building, they had a fire happen, but they persevered in order to have a space for African Americans to have a legal education.

Learning more about the culture from different alumni that I knew just solidified it all for me. I love that place because I just got so much from it.

A memorable moment from law school:

My son has asthma and he had an asthma attack near the beginning of a semester. We were all on Zoom because of the pandemic. I was really stressed out and overwhelmed because of course, asthma is no joke and I want my son to be able to breathe.

I was so stressed, because it was the first or second week [of the school year]. Once I knew my son was OK, I would go to the cafeteria in the hospital and log into class with headphones on, which of course was not ideal. But everyone was so understanding. When my classmates found out what was going on, one of my classmates reached out and asked if there was anything she could do. I really didn't want to ask her, because we're both students, but I asked her if she could help us with having dinner delivered, and she said, "Yes, absolutely, what do y'all want?" It just meant so much because that was to me one of the hardest moments of my law school career and everyone supported me.

What she wishes people knew about NCCU:

I think because we're not a UNC or a Duke (and I actually went to UNC for undergrad, so I love UNC), sometimes people overlook us. I wish that people would understand that the quality of education that we receive is superb. I'll put us up against the best. My law school really makes you practice-ready. It doesn't make you the person that's always going to win everything you encounter, but it does make you the most prepared.



Katherine Copeland

NCCU class of 2022

Clerk for Judge Allison Riggs on the North Carolina Court of Appeals

Her path to NCCU:

I had a 20-year career of being an engineer. But since I graduated from engineering school, I've always had a desire to go to law school. Sometimes life just gets in the way, but it was something that I really wanted to do. I realized that if you want to do something you just have to do it; it's not going to get any easier. I moved to North Carolina and I was trying to figure out, could I actually do this as a single mom raising a child?

NCCU offered the opportunity to attend an evening program where I could still maintain my job and go to law school. It would take an additional year, so instead of a three-year law school, I would have a four-year, year-round experience. That was a huge draw. I was also very happy that it was an HBCU.

Her law school experience:

Being in the evening program, you tend to have a smaller class made up of people who have been out in different industries for a period of time; we had somebody who's a probation officer, somebody who did marketing, somebody who worked for a trucking company. These people were in the same classes with me every night for years, and we became like a family. It was a really good experience because you're exposed to all of these different diverse viewpoints that help you grow as a person and see the world differently.

--Editing by Marygrace Anderson.

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