





LIGHTING UP THE PATH TO LAW SCHOOL

BY ALDEN FERRO
PHOTOS BY NINA OISHI '22



Yale Law School students and Law School Access Program Fellows meet during the fall semester.



When he was growing up, Shariful Khan '22 assumed that his legal aspirations would never come to fruition and that law school was reserved only for those who attended the most prestigious undergraduate institutions.

But while attending the City College of New York, Khan discovered a program that helped college students from underrepresented groups prepare for law school. The result was transformative, both practically and psychologically. The experience not only helped Khan fulfill his law school ambitions but changed his outlook on what was possible for him as a first-generation Bengali American.

“The program helped me believe that people like me — a kid from Queens without any connections — *deserved* to go to law school,” said Khan, a 2L at Yale Law School.

Now, along with other current students and recent graduates, Khan is helping design and implement a similar law school access pipeline program at Yale to help New Haven residents achieve their own law school dreams.

The Law School Access Program, conceived by J. Skelly Wright Professor of Law James Forman Jr. '92, aims to serve first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented minority students from New Haven by lighting up the pathway to applying successfully to law school and launching their legal careers. And it will all be provided to the Fellows, as the program calls participants, for free.

“New Haven is a city I love and care about very much,” Forman said. “It’s clear to me that this city and this community are full of people who have more potential than they do privilege.”

Origins and Scope

Forman began to conceive of the program in spring 2020, when he and several Yale Law student research assistants read *The Years That Matter Most: How College Makes or Breaks Us*. In the book, author Paul Tough reports on how high school students — including students of color and first-generation students — navigate the transition to college, the obstacles they face, and what programs exist to help them make that momentous transition.

As Forman’s students reflected on their own backgrounds — nearly all were also first-generation professional students or people of color themselves — they thought that a program that aided in the transition from college to law school would be useful and would especially fill a need in the New Haven community.

The Law School Access Program comprises several distinct parts: first, a yearlong series of Saturday “academies” — workshops for the Fellows on different facets of law school — demystify the admissions process, provide exposure to legal careers, and explain the financial

aid process. The academies also provide an opportunity to discuss racism and discrimination and provide wellness coaching on issues like test anxiety and the micro- and macroaggressions Fellows will face as they try to become lawyers.

“Not only will Fellows receive all of the logistical help they may need in preparing their applications,” said Elsa Mota '20, a recent Yale Law graduate who has worked closely with Forman and remains involved in the launch of the program. “But they will also be discussing the struggles students of color and first-generation students face in law school such as imposter syndrome.”

The second part of the program focuses on personalized LSAT preparation. Similar programs might offer discounted spaces in a traditional commercial test prep course, but Forman’s research showed that one-on-one guidance was the key to achieving strong improvement in LSAT scores.

“My operating principle is that we should provide people without resources the best; we should give our Fellows the same support that you would get if you had access to a lot of resources,” he said. “And what really moves the LSAT number...is the ability to sit down with someone who is skilled at understanding how the test works and can impart that knowledge to a student.”

In the third part of the program, Fellows will receive personalized support during the process of applying to and accepting an offer of admission to law school.

“Part of the admissions process is the psychological aspect — you have to believe you’ll get in or you won’t even try!” said Paula Garcia-Salazar '22, another student who has helped design the program and who benefited from a law school pipeline program herself. “But we also hope the program can actually substantially increase our Fellows’ odds of admission into the law schools of their choice through the variety of support that we’ll be giving them.”

A Focus on New Haven

Similar law school pipeline programs exist across the country but often serve students nationwide, meaning that other programs are competing with each other for the same pool of students. Forman wanted the Law School Access Program to be distinctly local and



serve the community where Yale Law School and its students reside. With its deliberate local focus on New Haven residents, the program will catalyze a group of future law school graduates that can have a profound impact on the legal profession city- and statewide.

With a 20-student cohort each year, “pretty quickly you can have an influence not just over the lives of individuals but the communities they are a part of,” Forman said. “This is about bringing wealth to communities that have been denied it — our Fellows will be able to get much better paying jobs than before — and it’s also about diversifying the local legal profession.”

As a result of outreach about the program into the community by Law School students and Forman, the program received 90 applications for 20 slots. Some of the incoming Fellows are on a more traditional path and are currently in college; others are older, including some who have been incarcerated.

“I want our Fellows to develop an attitude like ‘we’re in this together,’” he said. “They know one another’s neighborhoods and high schools. They know what it means to be from this city and collectively what they can do to help transform the city and the state.”

That sense of community has the potential to create lasting change, according to Mota. “I’m really excited for the community the Fellows will build for themselves,” she said. “We have selected an extraordinary group of powerful individuals who are sure to make huge changes to the city of New Haven and the world.”

Each Fellow had a Yale Law student mentor and a professional mentor such as a local New Haven lawyer, a Law School alum, or another legal professional. “Their mentor will be somebody we feel they’ll be able to make a connection with, and who is working in a job that they think they might like,” Forman said.

Learning How to Make Change

Even before the first Saturday academy with the Fellows, the Program has been impactful for the Yale Law students involved.

“Coming into YLS, I knew I wanted to be connected to the community of New Haven in a tangible and concrete way,” said Daria Rose ’22, one of the students who has helped Forman design the program. “I’ve already learned so much just from interviewing and interacting with our Fellows. They have incredible stories and life experiences, much of it coming from outside of a classroom.”

She hopes that the program can be a part of a broader antiracist initiative to empower people in the New Haven community, and the program launches at an especially pivotal moment in time.

Forman also hopes that the Law School students in his seminar will learn another vital skill for people who are interested in making



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change: how to build an innovative social justice program from the ground up.

Khan added, “The powerful tales these Fellows have — of overcoming adversity and finding hope when there was none to be found — that, to me says a lot about who they are and what they will bring to not just the legal profession, but the world.” 🗨️

Read more at law.yale.edu/yls-today/news/lighting-path-law-school.