



# MASSBAR FOUNDATION

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## **MBF's Legal Intern Fellowship Program Celebrates 25 Years of Creating Career Pathways to Public Interest Law**

***Boston Mayor Michelle Wu Among 130 Law Students Who Participated In Program***



**Mariatu Okonofua** quickly became immersed in the new school year following her experience as part of the Massachusetts Bar Foundation's Legal Intern Fellowship Program this summer, yet she finds the insights she gained over the 10 weeks continue to resonate.

Mariatu, who is completing her studies as a 3L student at **Boston College (BC) Law School** and an M. Ed candidate in Educational Leadership and Policy at BC's Lynch School, interned with the **EdLaw Project of the Committee for Public Counsel Services' Youth Advocacy Foundation**. There she conducted intakes with parents and legal guardians and performed advocacy research focusing on bilingual education and special education. Her in-depth conversations with parents crystallized for her the value of learning from and representing families' legal needs.

"Working with EdLaw helped me conceptualize the type of lawyer I want to be and how I want to use my J.D. to effectuate change," she says. "This summer has allowed me to recognize policy work as a key area of interest post-grad. I feel especially called to work toward improving language access for immigrant students and their families, with respect to special education." Through her role as co-president at BC Law's Public Interest Law Foundation, Mariatu looks to build on her fellowship experience to expand opportunities for "learning and celebration of public service and public interest law that encompass less traditional forms of legal advocacy, such as policymaking."

Mariatu is among a select cohort of law students who have been chosen to participate in the MBF's Legal Intern Fellowship Program since its inception in 1996. In that time, 130 law students representing 20 law schools have conducted internships at more than 36 sponsoring Massachusetts legal aid organizations. In total, \$642,000 has been awarded to allow talented law students the opportunity to explore careers in the public and nonprofit sector.

The Legal Intern Fellowship Program was established with a dual purpose: to create a pipeline of talented public interest attorneys practicing in the state, while also contributing valuable legal support to organizations providing civil legal services to low-income clients in Massachusetts.

With generous funding from the **MBF Fellows** and the **Clark R. Smith Family Fund**, the MBF can grant one of the highest stipends in Massachusetts, allowing the interns to focus fully on their public interest advocacy work. “The MBF Trustees are proud to offer a competitive stipend for the substantive work the students are providing” notes MBF President Angela McConney Scheepers, Esq. She also points out that MBF’s Legal Intern Fellows “reflect the diversity of backgrounds and lived experiences of all Massachusetts citizens. The Trustees have been very intentional about that over the years.”

As originally hoped, many former interns have gone on to launch very successful careers in the public service arena. For most, the internship supported by the MBF helped to direct their professional paths.

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In 2011, **Boston Mayor Michelle Wu** was a second-year student at **Harvard Law School** when she began her internship at the **Medical-Legal Partnership (MLP)** at **Boston Medical Center (BMC)**. MLP, now an organization with a national reach, allies health care providers with lawyers to improve the health and well-being of vulnerable populations and to ensure that patients’ basic needs – for housing, food, education, healthcare, and personal and family stability – are met. “The reason why I even applied to law school was because of my family’s experience with my mom struggling with serious mental illness,” Mayor Wu says. “In stepping in as her caregiver and raising my sisters, so much of what we saw were barriers that felt too high related to the health care system and who had access to it. I wanted to find ways that I could change the system for other people.”

Over the course of that summer, Mayor Wu provided direct client advocacy for immigration law cases, including those involving domestic violence survivors looking to remove conditions on their green cards and Haitian immigrants who needed to renew or apply for Temporary Protected Status. “I met so many clients at the hospital whose needs were deeply intertwined with the legal system and the health and well-being of their families. It was eye-opening to see how the law could have a big impact on whether a young person’s health condition could be treated effectively or how sustainable an intervention could be,” she recalls.

Today, as Mayor Wu leads a city of almost 700,000, she says that what she took from her internship contributed to a greater awareness of the systemic obstacles that can affect residents’ lives. “The more that I saw how our legal system and government structures can either connect families to what they need, or serve as areas of inevitable bureaucracy, the more motivated I was to find a way that we could get it right here in Boston. I saw firsthand at the hospital and through our clients’ eyes how programs might have had an intended goal, but unless they’re actually accessible to residents on the ground who have incredibly busy and stressful day-to-day lives, we’re not delivering the impact and potential that we could. I think about that quite often, in terms of how to ensure that we are really connecting.”



Early in his career, **Mario Paredes, Esq.**, knew he wanted to continue his work in the area of immigrant rights, but needed to gain the education required to further his legal advocacy skills. As a 2016 fellowship recipient, Mario found the experience he sought at **Kids in Need of Defense (KIND)**, an NGO that provides pro bono legal representation to unaccompanied and separated children. “I was able to work predominantly with youth from the Northern Triangle, comprised of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras,” he recalls.

Because Mario was able to take on meaningful responsibilities at KIND, he says he “started to gain the confidence to represent folks, to work hand-in-hand with staff attorneys, to be in the courtroom and to do advocacy more generally.” He also conducted research and took advantage of trainings and mentoring KIND offered to pro bono attorneys who were not necessarily practicing immigration law. These experiences, along with engaged supervision from **Attorney Elizabeth Badger**, who was herself an MBF Legal Intern Fellow in 2004, contributed to Mario’s commitment to the systemic advocacy work with immigrants he performs today.

Currently, Mario serves as a staff attorney for the **Immigrant Detentions Conditions Project**, a joint project with **Prisoners’ Legal Services of Massachusetts** and the **Massachusetts Law Reform Institute**. According to Mario, “Folks in ICE detention are facing different types of civil rights and human rights violations, but there really wasn’t the capacity for immigration attorneys to help in that area because they’re focused on supporting clients in immigration proceedings. I work between the two organizations to do advocacy work for those who are caught in the crosshairs of both the immigration and criminal legal systems.” He adds, “What I learned during my summer at KIND definitely informs the work I am doing now.”



When asked what motivated **Tinia Snow, Esq.**, to pursue a career in public interest law, she says, “It’s a very simple answer: I just wanted to help people. I wanted to be a voice for people who feel like they’re not being heard.” That drive led her to apply for an MBF Fellowship in 2007 to support her internship at the **Children’s Law Center of Massachusetts (CLCM)** and, later, to pursue legal positions in state and federal agencies.

As an undergraduate, Tinia had worked with young people in a group home and in other capacities. She was drawn to CLCM, she says, because they focused on educational advocacy and at the time had a criminal defense attorney on staff, **Barbara Kaban**. She was able to shadow Attorney Kaban, gaining valuable insights into the best practice in and out of court. “Attorney Kaban was really good about connecting with the community and with her clients and being very respectful of their culture,” she says. “That stood out to me. It’s important to know who you are assigned to represent, to learn their stories.” The stipend from MBF made it possible for Tinia to accept this full-time internship and immerse herself in the role.

For more than eight years, Tinia served as a trial attorney for the **Committee for Public Counsel Services, Youth Advocacy Division**, representing indigent juvenile defendants in Essex and Suffolk County. Her work as a defense attorney was recognized by the **Massachusetts Bar Association** with the 2019 Access to Justice Award. Currently, Tinia is a civil rights attorney with the **U.S. Department of Education**, working to ensure equal access to education and to promote education excellence through enforcement of civil rights in the nation's schools. In addition to her career success, Tinia has played a key role in the **Massachusetts Black Women Attorneys** organization, serving as president from 2018-2020. Of that experience she notes "It's about finding both professional and personal support for women like me, who might have been the only black attorneys in their area. It's about finding community. "

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The Legal Intern Fellowship Program provided an unexpected connection not long ago when **Nora Grais-Clements**, a fellowship recipient in 2011, supervised the internship of 2020 recipient, **Madison Picard**. Nora, whose own internship with **Community Legal Aid** deepened her commitment to working with victims of domestic violence, is now a Senior Attorney with the **Victim Rights Law Center (VRLC)**. According to Nora, her organization sponsors many interns, but Madison demonstrated qualities that set her apart. "In many, many

ways, Madison increased our capacity," Nora says. "She was enthusiastic and dedicated to what we're doing here. She's quick and attentive and produced very high-quality work."

Nora cites Madison's contributions to a project to improve accessibility of services to sexual assault survivors with intellectual developmental disabilities. "Madison had an ease with this work and was particularly attuned and helpful to the needs of that population. She was instrumental in terms of the initial development of the plain language materials that came out of our research." Nora appreciates the role the program plays in providing opportunities for a range of law students. "One of the reasons the fellowship is so important is that it aids students like Madison who really cannot do public interest work without the financial support," she observes.

As it moves into its second quarter century, the LIFP will continue to be a signature program of the MBF, as part of its commitment to help develop a diverse and talented pool of public interest attorneys and as part of its overall mission of ensuring equal access to the legal system for all citizens of the Commonwealth.

**For more information about the program, and to see a list of all the MBF Legal Intern Fellows over the years, visit [www.massbarfoundation.org/lifp](http://www.massbarfoundation.org/lifp).**