

Charting a Path Forward with Valerie Jarrett

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Chief among the characteristics of highly successful people are a fierce work ethic and the ability to make success look easy. A good example is Valerie Jarrett, Chief Executive Officer of the [Barack Obama Foundation](#), who spoke at Proskauer virtually last week as part of the firm's *A Path Forward* lecture series and [Collaborate for Change](#) program. The presentation was moderated by [Daryn Grossman](#), Proskauer's Managing Partner, and interspersed with personal stories from members of the Proskauer community.

Jarrett discussed her background, including the influence of her parents who told her if she set goals and worked hard, she could accomplish anything. Ironically, it was when Jarrett actually reached the pinnacle of success, as the longest-serving Senior Advisor in White House history, that her parents acknowledged that at the time they told her those encouraging words, they did not in fact believe them in light of their own experience. Indeed, Jarrett's father, an accomplished physician, took a job overseas before she was born because of the discrimination he faced as a Black doctor in the United States.

Jarrett emphasized the importance for all of us to engage in difficult conversations about race, explaining that you, "can't ignore the past if you expect to have a path forward." The murder of George Floyd shocked the nation but, in reality, there was nothing new about what occurred in the gruesome video that simply laid bare the longstanding racial injustice in this country. According to Jarrett, the question remains whether we will "rise to the moment" and recognize that although we have made substantial progress on racial and social justice, we still have a long way to go.

Those words resonate deeply as they relate to pro bono. Indeed, almost all of our pro bono work advances racial justice because of how deeply entrenched racial disparities remain in American institutions and society. We see this in education, housing, incarceration rates, and the wealth gap. We see this in our system of justice, where throughout the country certain courts like the family, housing, and criminal courts, which disproportionately serve people of color, are disproportionately under-resourced. And we see this in voting rights where throughout our history, up to and including the present day, there have been efforts to exclude people of color from exercising their most fundamental right in a democracy.

In sum, Jarrett reinforced the necessity to not only engage in discussion but to take action. This means fostering inclusive and diverse workplaces and no longer tolerating a two-tiered society or a second class system of justice for anyone.

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