

Proskauer Advances Racial Justice Through Fellowship

Proskauer For Good Blog on **March 3, 2022**

In 2020, Proskauer announced that it would establish a fellowship opportunity in partnership with the [NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund](#) (LDF) as part of its “[Collaborate for Change](#)” initiative to help fight racial injustice. In 2021, Austin McLeod, a labor and employment associate in Proskauer’s New York office, served as Proskauer’s inaugural Racial Justice Fellow, working at LDF for six months. Austin reflects below on his experience.

The Fellowship

Around late 2019, I really wanted to challenge myself to engage in pro bono work beyond my normal practice. The highly publicized displays of racial violence and unrest throughout the country in 2020 pushed me toward joining the fight for racial justice.

Proskauer announced a partnership with LDF for a fellowship opportunity for one associate. I jumped at the chance to work with LDF because 60 years ago they represented my grandmother and other families against a local school board refusing to integrate. I knew that this fellowship would be my chance to give back to an organization that had done so much for my family.

The Work

I primarily worked on various litigation teams. One team represented the Baltimore City Public Schools System, pertaining to the ongoing challenge of Maryland State Board of Education’s funding formula and the inadequate funding provided to Baltimore City Public Schools System.

Another team represented two incredible young men and one of their mothers in a lawsuit against a Texas school district, seeking relief from its grooming policy on the grounds that the policy's construction and enforcement is unconstitutional race and sex discrimination and violates students' rights to freedom of expression. The lawsuit alleges that students were unfairly disciplined due to their locs and that, after one student's mother spoke up about the discrimination, the school district retaliated against her. This case was especially topical as legislation is being enacted throughout the country seeking to protect ethnic hairstyles. Our team interacted with legislators, agencies, and various organizations regarding protection against this form of discrimination.

I also researched various issues for the LDF Policy team.

Experience

I was inspired by the courage exhibited by our clients willing to take a stand. I couldn't help but believe their courage mirrored that of my grandmother, who bravely led my family's legal fight. I was also inspired by the LDF community, which I found to be very collaborative and made it a point to celebrate victories, provide support during setbacks, and highlight individual efforts.

Coming from Big Law, I had to quickly get up to speed on these cases and while I was afforded independence, I was expected to yield strong results. The confidence I gained from my experiences will benefit me as I continue to practice law.

The fellowship was not without its challenges, however. In light of the fellowship coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, my experience was 100% remote. I was unable to physically meet with my clients and colleagues. This took away from my individual experience, but didn't decrease the importance or necessity of our work.

Advice to Others

To associates interested in the Fellowship: don't shy away from applying to this and similar opportunities, even if not a traditional litigator. This opportunity is for people who are interested in helping others and willing to learn and LDF does a great job providing resources and guidance.

To our broader community: seek out civil rights pro bono opportunities. Fighting for racial justice should not be the responsibility of civil rights organizations alone. Proskauer is committed to engaging in this fight, but will continue to need willing individuals to move these efforts forward.

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Related Professionals

- **Austin McLeod**
Associate