

## **Noor-ul-ain Hasan and Michael Harris**

Classmates Noor-ul-ain Hasan and Michael David Harris reflect on their experiences as 1L students and discuss their work with the Coalition for Diversity at Berkeley Law to support students of color.

**Noor-ul-ain:** I came to Berkeley Law because I really appreciated the unique viewpoints of the faculty in terms of the way that they approach their legal pedagogy, the different ways that the classroom can be an environment where we talk about the law and not just in terms of legal issues, but the social, political and economic conditions animating around those issues.

**Michael:** And there is this broad conception of what law school is like before you get here, right? It being very cutthroat, very competitive, and it being about legal ideas and of themselves almost without considering race and class. There's an initial performative aspect where you feel like you have to have your guard up to protect yourself, to make sure people think that you're intelligent, that you're working hard, and there's a hesitance to be vulnerable. And I think part of talking about where you come from, talking about your identity in the classroom, means that you're being vulnerable. In my 1L year class, it was only 10 black students out of 300. And that was difficult and often we're concerned that we have to represent our race when we talk about racial issues, when different cases come up, when Dred Scott comes up. And for me, too, it's refreshing to see professors, students talking openly with a big heart about those issues.

**Noor-ul-ain:** I took constitutional law. What was really formative for my experience as a 1L was that we position the conversation about the constitution around race and around other identities. And I think sometimes there is an inclination to form the conversation about the law around doctrine and sometimes I think we siphon off conversations about race and racism, sexism, homophobia, other types of ailments to conversations about public policy. And we create a sort of dotted line between the law and these policy issues. But what I appreciated about that class was that it came from this perspective that the law is entrenched in these issues. Rather than treat issues of identity as peripheral points of the law, they're central to legal analysis and how we think about the legal regimes that are propped up in our society, both domestically in the US, but also at an international and global level. So I appreciated that during my 1L year.

**Michael:** So by the end of our 1L, we decided to become student leaders and join the Coalition for Diversity. The Coalition for Diversity came about in 2001 after California passed Proposition 209, which stopped all public institutions of education from considering race for admissions. That year, the law school saw a drop in black students to just one single student that actually had been admitted the year before. So what went into your decision to start the academic empowerment program and can you explain what that is?

**Noor-ul-ain:** Sure. We recognized that there was a need to improve the 1L experience, particularly for students of color because of the ways in which the law uniquely deals with race and also intersections between race and other identities such as gender and socioeconomic status and sexual orientation. So the Academic Empowerment Program is a peer-to-peer academic skills lab and a community building initiative designed to enrich the academic conditions of students of color and those who are at the intersections of other marginalized identities at Berkeley Law.

**Michael:** When we were going to faculty, me and others, asking for more services and programs for students of color to feel like they belong here, we often got that response that Prop 209 stops us from doing much. So our program really helps supplement that and help build that sense of belonging.

**Noor-ul-ain:** I didn't realize how important social capital is in this profession in the sense that not only do you have to be thinking about your academic achievements and your ability to do substantive legal analysis and do writing and sophisticated research, but also, how do you connect with other people who are in this profession, people who are in positions of power, whether that's a professor that you could do research with or a potential future supervisor or even a peer who has navigated a process within law school that you might also navigate and could provide you guidance on. Social capital, I think is tremendously important in law school. And I think students of color come in with a unique background that may prevent us from having access to particular kinds of social capital or even know what to do with it when we do get social capital. So that was another, I think, unstated goal of the program—to just get 1Ls of color talking together about what are our experiences, where do we want to go, and what kind of experience do we want to have as future lawyers?

**Michael:** You're totally right. There's this sense when you come here that you're missing something. I have no lawyers in my family. I never really knew the pathway to being a successful lawyer. No one ever told me that. So you have to find those avenues and hopefully we can do that through the program.

We both were able to work at law firms over this last summer. And I wonder your sense when you were there, of how you felt, if you felt a sense of belonging, of dissonance.

**Noor-ul-ain:** I spent my 1L summer at a big law firm in Chicago. One of the most surprising things about my experience was getting used to having my own office. I grew up in a pretty modest, low income family just outside of Chicago. I'm not a first-generation college student, but I am a first-generation law student. There are no lawyers in my family and no one in my family I think even has any sort of graduate degree.

So it was really interesting to walk in on my first day and be given my own office in the Sears Tower, which is now called the Willis Tower in Chicago. This is my office. And just the feeling of being a professional and being treated like a professional. Having this unique space within this elite law firm environment. In some ways, I definitely felt like I belonged and had a really great time getting to know a lot of the associates and partners.

But I felt like a fish out of water and I would sometimes question what have I done to deserve this office? I feel like I'm a kid sometimes still. And to generate that type of presence and respect and have that type of space in that type of building in downtown Chicago, I think took a long time for me to get used to. And I'm sure that as I navigate similar experiences throughout the rest of my legal career, the sense of being in a position of power is very foreign and novel for me. And thinking about how to be comfortable in that role is part of it.

And I think another thing that comes up is how do I enter this role responsibly? How do I make sure that the door is left open behind me for other folks from marginalized backgrounds to come in and not just be offered jobs, but thrive and have the opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way and feel a part of an organization and a part of this profession.

**Michael:** You know, for students of color, for students that come from a low-income background, what thriving means can be very different. And there's a sense of responsibility to give back to your community, to give back to where you came from, to make sure that those doors are open. And that's the responsibility a lot of people don't have. If they're from a more privileged background, they don't feel that need. You know, you're just working hard doing your job every day and not having some sort of connection or tie to your community, you feel like something's missing. And I came away feeling that way.

**Noor-ul-ain:** I think the best way that law professors and students alike can create better conditions to talk about race and talk about gender and all of these different issues in the classroom is to have empathy and to create a classroom environment where you can pass the mic around and have people share what their impressions are based on their own identities and the way in which they see their identities and their experiences animating and reflecting in the cases that we read.

The way that we talk about cases starts from a two-dimensional context. It's very easy to forget that those are real people that have had real experiences and interactions with the law. So making a classroom environment where we make those stories come to life and not just be opinions that we're reading in a book is to create the space to talk about those people and the way in which they're interacting with the law.

**Michael:** Legal education for me has meant that I'm constantly aware of my blind spots. And I think as we become practitioners, we need to be aware of how we're ignorant in different ways and be always willing to learn more. Ask questions, be aware of the voices that aren't being heard in the room, to try to come to them with the solution or with hearing their ideas. And I think it's important to recognize we're at more than a hundred-year-old institution, Berkeley Law School, and it's changing constantly. The make-up is changing, the rules are changing, what students can do is changing. And I think both of us have been at the vanguard of trying to push that change, to come to the very edge of what people think is possible for students to do and to ask for more. And as we enter law firms, as we enter government, as we enter the courtroom, we should be aware of what we often think is black and white rules is not so simple.