

JOAN KOMOLAFE

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General Counsel, P.C.
6849 Old Dominion Dr #220
McLean, VA 22101

Re: 2022 General Counsel, P.C. First Generation Law Student Scholarship

As a first-generation African American law student, your General Counsel, P.C. First Generation Law Student Scholarship will allow me to contribute to the legal profession by serving as a mentor, role model, and pipeline for diverse candidates. As immigrants to the United States, my parents impressed upon me the importance of community. My mother was a Nigerian civil war refugee, while my father immigrated to the United States later in his life. The tenet of community building was never more vital to me than at the age of 11 when I moved to live in my father's home village of Igede, Nigeria. I soon learned how necessary adaptation was to thrive in my new environment and began to bond with my new classmates, forming a tight-knit community. From doing our weekly chores together to commiserating about our shared disdain for the sheer heat, my time at the school showed me that seeing the humanity in each other is what allows you to find your place.

Adaptation proved indispensable to me once again when I emigrated back to the United States, and I was reintroduced to a now unfamiliar country. I looked for belonging as my classmates would tease me, asking if I had malaria in between their clicking noises directed my way. I seized this as an opportunity to use my experience to contribute to the world around me. We read the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in class. During our lessons, I enriched the classroom discussions using my lived experience to help my classmates understand some of the book's cultural aspects.

As I continued finding my footing back in America, financial hardship further impacted my family, and my father declared bankruptcy. While my classmates enjoyed playing sports after class or going to the city on weekends, I knew these were activities my family could not afford. The stress of worrying about every dollar spent motivated me to seek different opportunities, and I began volunteering with my school's Key Club to assist others in a low-cost way.

Since then, the innovation I needed to adapt throughout my life has inspired me to strive toward innovative paths to solutions within my professional and extra-curricular pursuits. I have consistently sought invaluable activities that allowed me to interact with fellow diverse populations. The global values I developed due to my immigrant background were an immense asset to me while serving in Eastern Europe with the United States Peace Corps upon graduation from undergrad. While abroad, I connected with a local advocacy-focused NGO, National Roma Centrum. The NGO's mission is to provide and strengthen access to legal aid for the Roma, a marginalized group in the region. I began assisting the executive director of the NGO, a middle-aged Roma man, in writing grants and advocacy-based project proposals to improve the lives of Roma in the nation. As an immigrant and member of a marginalized community myself, I could connect with the community I was serving and understand the issues of subjugation within the country that

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they were fighting. I was often the first American and first African American that many of my North Macedonian community members ever encountered. Serving on the Peace Corps Diversity and Inclusion committee board, I created English language workshops to introduce my local community members to the diversity of the United States. This experience solidified for me how environments where I encounter people different from me can offer opportunities to share my diverse perspective.

I will never forget meeting Ajsena and her four-year-old son Denis. She was the victim of domestic abuse, with no legal documentation and no available housing. Along with a lawyer from the NGO, I helped her petition the Ministry of Justice and aided her in filing for her right to legal citizenship and housing beginning in January 2019. Because the Roma are classified as a traveler group in Eastern Europe, obtaining Ajsena's documentation was convoluted. We composed various petitions and appeals to the courts simultaneously. Reading and translating these documents for Ajsena allowed me to see the law practice's nuances because the organization's lawyer and I would revise, file, and resubmit her case documents. Once we sent our last petition for her case, we did not hear back from the court for months. Finally, in October 2019, the Ministry granted Denis and Ajsena citizenship and the ability to have independent housing.

I closed out my service with a speech in front of all the remaining volunteers, the ambassador to North Macedonia, the country director, and the American embassy staff. I shared my story as a testament to my cohort to encourage them to persevere in the face of doubts before we took our next steps after service. My satisfaction working with the Roma rights NGO came directly from the legal aspects of the work. Our work showed me how the law could positively impact marginalized members of society globally.

Now, I am eager to combine my prior work experience and the new legal skills I've gained through law school to make meaningful contributions to the lives of my future clients. This summer, I was able to work directly with clients, many of whom were immigrants themselves, at Yale Law School's Legal Clinic to continually foster my legal interests. Recently, my legal internship with the Association of Corporate Counsel allowed me to hone my legal research and writing skills while gaining valuable insight into a typical firm client's considerations and concerns while contributing my diverse perspective.

I fully commit to realizing my goals and now look forward to growing as a first-generation attorney. I am confident that my experiences will prove vital in helping the generation of first-generation lawyers to come after me continue to advance inclusivity and diversity within the legal field.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration.

Sincerely,

Joan Komolafe

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