

LEGAL OUTREACH ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Newsletter

LO Alumnae is Moving the Needle of Justice with the FurtherJustice Foundation

Interviewer: Congratulations on this bold move to start your own organization! First, can you tell us about the FurtherJustice Foundation? How would you describe it and what is its mission?

Akilah: Our mission is to support community-based organizations that are trying to launch or expand civil legal service programs, particularly in communities where there is a scarcity of legal help for residents, communities where the majority of

Above: Akilah Browne,
co-founder of
FurtherJustice Foundation

residents in need are low-income and/or people of color. In the summer, we plan to open up applications for our Legal Accelerator Grant. Our grantees will not only receive funding, but also a close-touch relationship with the Foundation which means we will provide individualized guidance on developing and managing the infrastructure to support and sustain specific types of legal services. Even as our grantees provide legal support to the community, they also need to think about organizational and structural matters including compliance, intake and case management, and even recruiting and utilizing volunteers. Those are the types of services we're ready to roll up our sleeves and figure out, not in place of but alongside our grantees.

Interviewer: What are the specific services the Foundation provides to meet its goals and objectives?

Akilah: What my partner and I envision is not only providing financial support but also bringing our expertise to the table to help our grantees create the infrastructure that will allow them to work effectively and efficiently as they serve the legal needs of clients. In essence, we seek to work side-by-side with the organization to create an internal structure that will help alleviate the pressure that comes with doing the external good work. The idea is that we're working together to help figure out and execute the cumbersome and difficult processes that must be put into place while simultaneously trying to serve many clients. That's the framework for the Legal Accelerator Grant Program.

Interviewer: Who are you targeting as the recipients of your grants and services?

Akilah: Our grantees can be new or established nonprofits. The key criterion is that they're community-based. We want them to have local ties and an intimate and in-depth understanding of the communities they're serving. Essentially, we're looking for community-based organizations that are seeking to provide client centered legal services as a tool for empowering those in the community. It's a plus, obviously, if the organization and the people who are leading the legal program are from the community or represent the community that's being impacted. We also want to reach areas where there's a scarcity of free legal services.

Interviewer: What inspired you to create the FurtherJustice Foundation or what have you experienced/observed that convinced you that there was a need for the services that you provide?

Akilah: The inspiration came from my FurtherJustice partner, Jennifer Kroman. She saw that in Eastern Long Island, for example, so many people could not access a lawyer as easily as they could had they lived in New York City, but the need is particularly acute for low-income and immigrant communities – for immigration relief, housing, and more. That was what sparked the idea for her. For me, I've always been focused on how we can move the needle further to true justice – no pun intended – specifically in communities of color. How do we liberate black and brown people from the myriad of issues and entanglements that they find themselves trapped in? One important first step is providing access to free lawyers. There's lots of visioning happening in these communities around what the future could look like if residents were liberated from civil legal issues, like housing insecurity or government benefit denials, that affect their quality of life on a day to day basis.

Interviewer: What do you hope to achieve?

Akilah: We consider our North Star to be universal access to counsel for civil legal issues. If you are facing jail time, you are guaranteed the right to a lawyer. However, if you're facing a threat to your life in other ways, like deportation, eviction, or crippling debt, then you don't have the right to a lawyer. Yet on the other side, there is either a well-resourced government department or company that has a team of lawyers with the time to just essentially take you through the ringer. There's funding for civil legal services in many of your large cities but even that comes with a lot of restrictions. Certain immigrants can't get assistance through government funded organizations, for example. That's why we'll focus on communities where there's a scarcity of legal help. We're trying to essentially interject and provide some support and also help create programs that are sustainable.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit about your college and career trajectory that led you to this project?

Akilah: After I graduated from high school and Legal Outreach, I attended Hobart and William Smith Colleges. I majored in Media and Society and minored in both Public Policy and Writing. After college, I worked at Cleary Gottlieb, which already felt like home for me, mainly because they have such a close relationship with Legal Outreach and because many attorneys there seemed to have a genuine passion for service. While working as a paralegal, I studied for the LSAT and was accepted to Fordham Law School. Around the same time, I was also offered a position at Cleary as a pro bono coordinator working with my current FurtherJustice Foundation partner, who was the head of the pro bono department at the time. In weighing my options, I decided to do both! I went to law school at night and worked during the day. While in law school, I developed an interest in community ownership models. During my final year, I was awarded a Skadden Fellowship and worked at an economic justice organization where I helped provide policy and legal support to organizations trying to develop community land trusts as a way of fostering community-led development. While I was wrapping up my fellowship, my FurtherJustice partner approached me about joining her on this venture. It was a transition but a good fit. I've always put justice and liberation at the forefront of my career. Through the foundation, I have the opportunity to work with community-based organizations and help accelerate their programs. Rather than imposing ourselves, we can essentially offer our grantees a menu of options for ways to work together and then let them tell us what works best for them. The future is exciting!

Interviewer: Can you think of one or two of the most important lessons you learned or skills you gained while at LO that have contributed to your remarkable success thus far?

Akilah: There is one line that I'll never forget from the Legal Outreach pledge: "short-term gain leads to long-term pain, and short-term pain leads to long-term gain." I tell myself that every time daunting challenges arise. When I was in law school at night and trying to manage a pro bono practice by day, it was very challenging. I just told myself that while it feels difficult at the moment, this will have great results and you just have to push through it. LO also gave me the tools to succeed: the ability to write effectively, but also the ability to take in information to enhance my communication skills. There was so much reading and writing that we had to do over the course of the four-year program, but those are skills that I needed in order to get through challenging times. I'm just so thankful for that. You can come into a challenge with big goals and big dreams, but if you don't have the ability to execute, it's nothing. Legal Outreach gave us the tools and I've definitely needed and utilized them along the way.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you would like people to know?

Akilah: I will say that if people are reading this and work with organizations that fit into the criteria of what I said, our website should be launching this month, so look out for us or follow us on [LinkedIn](#) for updates. Our first round of grants will fund organizations in NY (excluding NYC), NJ and CT. We want to cast the application net wide and far in those locations. Not every organization is going to be a good fit but for those who are, I believe we're going to do great work together in the justice arena. If you're a grassroots organization, you're in our sweet spot, so please don't hesitate to reach out.

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