



# Finding the Class of 2009

By Glenn Cook

**NILA BALA knows the work she does as a public defender is frowned upon in some circles. Most of her clients don't know that she is a Yale Law School graduate, or that she chose to forego a lucrative career in private practice to work in a city beset by racial turmoil.**

Or that she can't imagine doing anything else.

"Public defenders don't have the greatest reputation," said Bala, who started work in Baltimore, Md., in 2014, just months before Freddie Gray died while in police custody, sparking riots, looting and arson. "Many people don't even know that we are attorneys, and they seem shocked when I say that I'm not going private. I had other choices, but I chose to do this. It's what I want to do."

Bala had the financial freedom to pursue her passion thanks to the LMJ Scholarship, the Minority Corporate Council Association program that has assisted more than 180 law students over the past 12 years. She is one of 16 recipients from the Class of 2009, the fifth such group to be honored.

"It helped me so much," Bala said of the \$10,000 scholarship, which she received for each of her three years in law school. "I graduated with a lot less debt, and that opened up so many more possibilities. I had more choices and freedom to pursue what I wanted, and I was able to find my calling at 25 or 26 instead of 35 or 36 because I did not have that overwhelming financial obligation."

## **Family Influences Advocacy Approach**

While most LMJ recipients finish law school and go into some type of legal work, like Bala, many have moved onto varied careers in the corporate, government, and nonprofit sectors. What they have in

common are the barriers—cultural, financial, and socioeconomic—they’ve managed to overcome.

Bala, whose parents who immigrated from South India in the 1980s, spent most of her childhood in Mesa, Ariz. A self-described voracious reader as a child—“I ate books like they were food”—she saw her parents struggle to help her sister, who had learning disabilities and needed special education services. But their combative advocacy on her sister’s behalf left a lasting impression.

“Because we were an immigrant family, it took my parents longer to recognize that the school system was required by law to respond to her needs,” she said. “It was the first time I saw how hard it is when you speak with a foreign accent, when you don’t know the system, when you don’t know what your rights are.

“My sister was branded almost from the day she came into class. ‘This kid has learning disabilities. Her dad can be difficult and demanding.’ You could see it, even when you started a new year in a new classroom. It didn’t seem fair to me at all, that she wouldn’t be able to make a first impression on her own and be treated with respect. That stuck with me.”

At 13, Bala’s parents moved to Fremont, Calif., about 45 minutes southeast of San Francisco. She attended Mission San Jose High School, one of the top schools in California, and faced different pressures. The school had “very few kids who looked like me,” making her feel socially awkward, and she dove into academics.

Bala went to Stanford, graduating with a bachelor’s degree in human biology, and taught preschool before she decided to pursue a legal career. She also interned at the Youth Law Center and thought she would move into legal advocacy for children when she was accepted to Yale in 2009.

“I took criminal law during the second semester of my first year and loved it,” she said. “But I found it was quite difficult to help children in the way I had hoped. When you’re the child advocate, it’s hard to get anyone around the table to listen to you. You are often choosing between bad and worse, and it’s no fault of the child. It’s very, very difficult work.”

### Helping Juveniles Navigate the System

Bala interned in the San Francisco Public Defender’s Office between her first and second year of law school, then worked as a law clerk in federal court in Houston for a year after graduation. In 2013, she was named a public interest law fellow in the Santa Clara County public defender’s office in California.

“When I was in San Francisco, I got to go into court and cross examine police officers,” she said. “I found I really liked it. I really enjoyed being in the courtroom.”

In Santa Clara, she provided post-conviction assistance in the juvenile unit, working to help young adults ages 19 to 21 keep their records sealed. Most had been arrested on sex-related offenses as teens.

“California is one of seven states that puts you on the sex offense registry for life, and it really amounts to banishment,” she

said. “So many of my clients were just kids when these sex offenses occurred, and it was mostly around inappropriate touching. Most of them had been molested themselves, so these were really terrible cases. I found that they were really grateful when I could help them navigate the system and move on in their lives.”

In 2014, Bala married Mukund Ramkumar, a medical school student she met in college. The couple moved to Baltimore so he could start an internal medicine residency at Johns Hopkins University, and she was hired by the Office of the Public Defender. She works in the Baltimore’s Western District Courtroom in the northwest part of the city, the same area where Freddie Gray was killed.

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“I do all kinds of misdemeanor cases. The majority of them involve drugs, but there are serious traffic offenses, such as DUIs and hit and runs, and handgun cases as well,” she said. “What many people don’t understand is that misdemeanors in Maryland carry sentences of up to 20 years, so you’re talking about something that can affect and alter someone’s life forever.”

Bala said she makes “pretty much the same money as a preschool teacher” as a public defender. But she said it is her calling.

“I get to work with people every day and hear their stories. If I can’t help them get completely out of their situation, I can definitely help by standing there and being there for them,” she said. “My job is not to judge guilt or innocence, but to be there on one of the hardest days of a person’s life. Wouldn’t you want someone who has your back, no questions asked? That’s what I get to do for people.”

### A New Move

Given the nature of her work, it’s no surprise that Bala has found outlets that help ease the daily stress and tension of being a public defender. With fellow Yale alums Rachel LaViola and Sarah Larsson, she is part of The Nightingale Trio, a woman’s acapella vocal group that recreates traditional folk songs and vocal techniques of the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

The group, which is releasing its second CD this year and has appeared on NPR’s “Prairie Home Companion,” formed after the three graduated from law school in 2012. Even though they live in different states, the singers go to new cities to perform for a weekend every two months.

“I’ve always loved to sing. It’s something I’ve done since I was 4 or 5 years old,” Bala said. “Being part of the woman’s choir at

Yale was my favorite part of law school, and we've been able to make this work. It's a great release."

In November, Bala and her husband will move to Trinidad for a year, where they will live in an ashram to study Hindu philosophy. "We will have a chance to learn Sanskrit, practice meditation and chanting, and acquire techniques to live a better, more service-oriented and spiritual life," she said.

But before she leaves, Bala has a work-related project that she has become passionate about: challenging excessive money bails during bail reviews.

"I hope to go into courtrooms and help the judiciary understand that unsecured bonds, where a defendant promises to pay the money if he or she doesn't show up to court, rather than posting the money on the front end, are just as effective cash bails," she said. "With luck, we can contribute to an understanding that money bails have terrible collateral consequences for our clients and their families — losing jobs, housing, children, not to mention being saddled with debt, even after their charges get dismissed."

It's this type of work, she said, that feeds her professional spirit.



"I can say that I know what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm not sure whether it's for the rest of my life or just for now, but I know I'm supposed to do this," Bala said. "We are living in difficult times, tense times. I don't know objectively that it's worse now than it has been, or whether people are noticing things more because of camera phones and technology that is pushing these types of incidents out there, but I know that I can actually do something to help. And that is a great feeling. It is a blessing." ■

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## The 2009 recipients of the Minority Corporate Counsel Association's LMJ Scholarship have gone on to varied careers in the corporate, government and nonprofit worlds.

Here is an update on the class and what they are doing now:

■ **Alemayehu Ayanaw** is an associate with the Hepler Broom Law Firm in Edwardsville, Ill., where he focuses his practice on trials involving complex business litigation matters, including toxic torts, premises liability and product liability.

■ **Alejandro Callirgos** is a freelance writer and middle/high school English teacher at the International School in Singapore.

■ **Jennifer Castillo** is an associate at Brustein & Manasevit in Washington, D.C., where she assists clients with various federal education matters.

■ **Kendri Cesar** is an associate with Sonosky, Chambers, Sachse, Miller & Munson, LLP in Juneau, Alaska, practicing administrative and Alaska Native law.

■ **Peter Chin** is an attorney in private practice in Baltimore, Md.

■ **Bejidé A. Davis** is an associate at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP in New York City.

■ **Elio Gonzalez** is an attorney in the Office of Chief Counsel for U.S. Customs and Border Protection in Los Angeles, Calif.

■ **Kelvan Howard** is a senior director of intellectual property strategy at Visa in the San Francisco Bay Area.

■ **Edwin Lindo** is an attorney, community organizer and candidate for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

■ **William Moon** is a litigation attorney with Boies Schiller & Flexner, LLP

■ **William Perry** is an associate with Greenberg Traurig, LLP in New York City.

■ **Diane Rish** is an associate with Ogletree Deakins in Raleigh, N.C.

■ **Freddie Stokes** is an attorney with The Carter Firm, P.C., in Mobile, Ala.

■ **Karla Turner Anderson** is an associate with Poyner Spruill in Raleigh, N.C.

■ **Demi Williams** is an assistant district attorney in the San Francisco District Attorney's Office.

■ **Timothy Wong** is a certified public attorney in Seattle, Wash.

Details about the **LMJ Scholarship Program** can be found at [www.mcca.com/scholarships](http://www.mcca.com/scholarships).