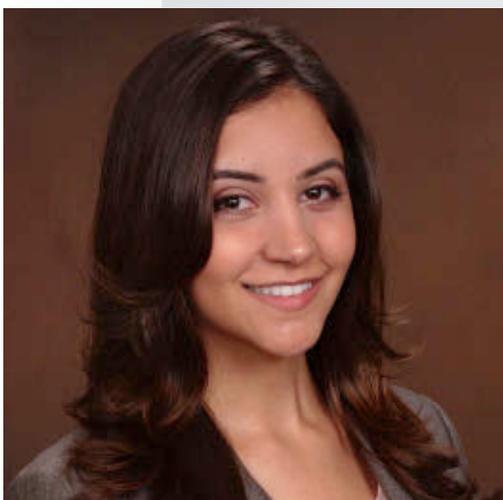


# The Future of the Legal Profession

## Meet the 2015–2016 LMJ Scholars

By **GLENN COOK**



Heidi Savabi

The daughter of an Iranian refugee and a Spanish immigrant, Heidi Savabi saw firsthand the adversity and discrimination her parents had to overcome due to “their appearance and accents.” By the time she reached college, she was determined to help others in similar situations.

“My father was the oldest student and the only foreigner in his college. My mother

worked long shifts in a factory to support the family while my father was in school,” said Savabi, who is completing her first year at Northwestern University School of Law. “Witnessing their struggle and learning of the difficulties that immigrants and refugees experience around the world compels me to act.”

Savabi’s drive to help others through the law is

reflected in this year’s class of 15 LMJ Scholarship winners, many of whom are first- or second-generation Americans who witnessed their parents’ struggle to succeed. They see how the legal field, especially one that reflects the country’s increasingly diverse population, can make a difference for families like theirs.

Thanks to the MCCA program, which has been in place since 2004, more than 180 highly qualified but financially challenged students have received \$10,000 scholarships to help them pursue a corporate law career.



Leah Wong



Brittany Porter

All recipients said the scholarship allows them to pursue their passion for the law and make vital connections in their respective fields without facing enormous debt after they graduate.

“Law school is a very serious investment, and many people get discouraged from ever pursuing their dreams because of the astronomical debt and tuition that comes with it,” said Leah Wong, one of this year’s recipients. “For me, this scholarship not only allows me to attend law school but be more bold and creative in deciding what that career will look like. Rather than only pursue positions for strictly monetary reasons, I can consider other aspects that are really important in a legal career, too.”

### Public Service on Path to Law School

Public service through a global lens, as well as a diverse range of experiences that pointed them toward their future legal careers, is a hallmark of many recipients in this year’s scholarship class. Brittany Porter and Destiny Dike taught in urban high schools in Texas through Teach for America, while Wong spent a year with AmeriCorp in the San Diego County District Attorney’s Office before being admitted to University of Pennsylvania Law School.

“They have spent their entire lives working on access to justice for marginalized groups of people,” Wong said of her AmeriCorp experience. “Not by any conscious means, all my mentors have been people of color who have surpassed their bounds and trailblazed in their careers. It’s insane how much I learned from them and continued to learn from them.”

Porter moved from Fort Worth to Texas after receiving her bachelor’s degree and taught algebra

I for two years at the lowest-performing high school in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Both years, her students passed the state tests, exceeding the district average.

“The best moment in my life was being able to tell my students, who had been conditioned from years of failing their state standardized exams, that they passed,” Porter said. “Watching the sense of joy, elation and relief pass across their faces all at once was all the validation I needed for my work.”

While at the University of Miami, where she majored in international relations and Latin American studies, Savabi studied abroad in Peru and Guatemala for a semester each, working at an orphanage for former trafficked child sex workers and as a research assistant on a huge immigration project in Central America. Those experiences, she said, strengthened her resolve to help others in need and served as a reminder of what her parents had overcome.

“Living thousands of miles from any family, my parents were left to rely exclusively on each other for support, which was difficult for them both emotionally and financially,” she said. “Despite their struggles, they remained positive and instilled a strong work ethic and resiliency in their children. They sacrificed and struggled so that I could pursue the career of my choosing. I do not take that lightly.”



Destiny Dike



Antionette Carradine



Alexandria Gilbert



Miguel Del Mundo



Steven Morris



Maria Adebayo



Marina Bontkowski

### Family Inspirations

Wong, a first-generation Asian-American, who grew up the oldest of six with a single mom, is the first in her family to get a college degree. She said her path to law school was not the result of “specific events or aha moments,” but a steady evolution that grew into a passion, thanks to her mother.

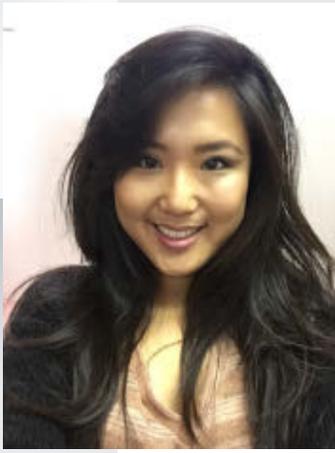
“Sometimes the world felt a little too big for my mom, five siblings and me, but my mother never allowed us for a second to think we had any setbacks,” Wong said. “She only reminded us that we were different to make sure we stood out and worked hard and spread compassion because of our differences.”

Porter also pointed to the women in her family as her inspiration to pursue education and, later, law school. As a child, she spent weekends with her great-grandmother, watching an endless diet of “Judge Judy” and “The Judge Mathis Show.” At her grandmother’s house, she learned the valuable lesson of “emancipation through education.”

“Through education and excelling in school, she reminded me that I would be able to open doors for myself outside the scope of those who try to place limitations on my achievements due to my race or gender or both,” Porter said. Porter participated in

mock trials and on the debate team at her Florida high school and now is completing her first year at Pepperdine University’s law school.

Marina Bontkowski, a Cuban-American whose mother’s family fled to the U.S. in 1961, took a longer path to University of California Berkeley Law School. She taught third graders for two years at a private boys school in New York state, then went to CUNY-John Jay College for a master’s degree in forensic mental health counseling and a certificate in terrorism studies. For four years in New York City, she assisted a forensic psychiatrist in court evaluations before moving cross-country to go to law school.



Joo Hyun Park



Shundra Crumpton



Bianca Serrato



Claudia Ojeda



Taylor Padilla

“I really enjoyed my work but felt I could do more as a lawyer than I could as an assistant,” Bontkowski said, noting her passion to become an attorney was stirred after seeing the unequal treatment of minority defendants firsthand. “I saw the impact of an effective lawyer, and I also appreciated the intellectual challenge that comes with being a good attorney. I have always enjoyed being an advocate for others and hope to continue doing so.”

### Serving as Advocates

As a woman whose mother, grandmother and great-grandmother struggled to succeed in a segregated South, Porter is adamant that more African-Americans should pursue legal careers. Noting that fewer than 5 percent of all attorneys are black, she pointed to increased racial tensions across the U.S. and called for more representation a “sure way to tackle the discrepancy between the criminal justice system and the black community.

“In a utopia-like society, this would not matter. In fact, this should not matter in principle, until we are faced with another law enforcement officer escaping charges for the murder of yet another unarmed black male; then it does,” said Porter, who wants to be a partner in a large corporate firm. “As a community,

our strength lies in numbers. If we can change the demographics of the criminal justice system, we can change the way it has and currently is affecting our people as well.”

Wong, who will intern with the United Nations in Geneva this summer, said she is “constantly changing my mind” about what type of law to pursue, but she knows that she wants to “work to further opportunity, human rights and representation of marginalized groups.”

“Since coming to law school, the law has only surprised me more and more with all of its power and possibilities,” she said. “Ultimately, I hope to work at the nexus of government, business and nonprofit one day to find institutional solutions to the world’s remaining problems, whether it’s on a direct level or a policy-driven, big-picture level. I still have to hone a lot of these aspirations down, but I’m so grateful to LMJ/MCCA for allowing me the opportunity to figure it all out.”

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

**GLENN COOK** ([glenncook117@gmail.com](mailto:glenncook117@gmail.com)) is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in Northern Virginia.