

Lauren Bess

Terry Bryant Scholarship Essay

As a woman entering the legal field, I feel the pressures from both society and my peers to continuously “prove” myself. While the field itself has encouraged greater gender diversification, women in the legal field often feel as though they carry the gender on their backs. I am committed to creating both gender equality in the workplace, but also elevating the burden underrepresented groups feel in the constant battle to earn a place at the table. My prior experience working in a criminal defense office opened my eyes to the inequalities in the criminal justice system, and the importance of being a zealous advocate for your client.

As the newly elected Class of 2021 President, I am actively working to create an inclusive campus environment and advocate for the educational needs of each and every student. During the current pandemic, I have created class discussion forums to keep students engaged, connected, and offer resources for those in need. I highlight job opportunities and research assistant roles, as many students’ employment and internship programs have been halted. I intend to fundraise for campus bar preparation materials, as this is another financial burden each graduate is forced to take on.

As the past President of Rutgers’ Woman’s Law Caucus I worked to expose my law school peers to areas of the legal field where women are too often marginalized. I hosted panels of experienced, practicing female attorneys who identified the struggles woman lawyers face on a daily basis. They discussed overcoming these hurdles and highlighting our personal strengths, which was encouraging and empowering to be a part of. My organization partnered with the I Dare to Care Association, a youth organization for young girls in our local area. My board held mentoring sessions with the girls, including a mock trial program to inspire the next generation of female lawyers. Additionally, I was integral in bringing an implicit bias training for students and faculty to the law school. Implicit bias training has now become mandatory for all students and staff, and will help to transform our law school community in positive, inclusive ways.

My first semester of law school I was diagnosed with Stage 3, Nasopharyngeal Cancer. I underwent two surgeries, and intensive treatment throughout my first year. While law school has always been my passion and dream, I was forced to take a step back and limit my course load during my first year. My doctors encouraged me to take time off, but I refused to let cancer define me. I treated at Penn University’s Perelman Center for Advanced Medicine, 5 days a week, receiving both radiation and chemotherapy. My mother would drive me to class each day and then directly to the hospital for treatment. I attribute much of my strength and willpower to the support of my law school peers and dedication towards achieving my goal. Attending classes motivated me to continue striving towards success. I have since taken the extra credits needed to graduate with my class as expected.

While on my path to remission, I lost the majority of my hearing as a side-effect of the chemotherapy drug. I did not let this speedbump curtail my academic journey. At first I would shy away from seeking accommodations because of the stigma associated with having a disability. Now, I am proud to claim this disability as part of my identity. The grueling demands

of the legal field may deter unconventional students or students with disabilities, but I hope to encourage students to pursue their goals in spite of their limitations. I want to make a positive impact on my local legal community by celebrating everyone's uniqueness and identifying the benefits of diverse collaboration. I have turned these limitations, into personal strengths. A decrease in hearing has forced me to become more attuned to small details, including the self-expressions of others, which my peers often overlook. What I once saw as a setback has motivated me to become an activist. I encourage the legal field to strive towards greater disability diversification in the workplace.

My diversity will make a positive impact within the legal field because the skills I have developed in overcoming several challenges make me an asset. I had the opportunity to extern with Rowan University's General Counsel's Office, which has motivated me to advocate for disabled students in acquiring the proper resources and accommodations needed for success. This semester I chose to take Education Law & Policy and Social Welfare Law & Policy because I want to advocate for equal rights, opportunities and resources for all students and workers. As an outspoken woman, cancer survivor and proud deaf student, I hope to greater diversify the legal field to reflect the communities we serve. I want to be a pillar of strength for students and individuals that society continues to marginalize.