

Terry Bryant 2021 Law School Scholarship

My journey to law began when I was a young boy shining shoes with my dad. You will not see this experience on my résumé, but it was the first job I ever had. Through it, I learned values that prepared me to serve my community as an attorney. The process for shining shoes is simple: clean, polish, and wax.

I learned to shine shoes with my father at his small business, Graham Shoe Repair. When I was in the fourth grade, my dad and I worked on a pair of cowboy boots. We were on the first step, cleaning. While washing the boots with Saddle and Leather Soap, he asked me, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I quickly replied, “I want to take over the family business and keep Graham Shoe Repair going!” My father dried his boots with a rag then sat them by his side. He looked at me and said, “Son. I love what I do, but you have to figure out what kind of impact you want to make. You can change the world.” Like with his cowboy boots, my dad was wiping away all doubts I had about my potential.

Polishing is the next step in the process. There are two parts: cover the leather with shoe polish, then brush it all off. This step is the messiest part, but it is necessary to create a foundation for the shine. In my head, I was going through a similar process as I dreamed of the person that I might become. While my mind wandered, I began to cover the entire boot with black Lincoln Shoe Wax. The boots and my dreams begin to glow a little brighter.

Sometime later, I watched *The Road to Brown*. This documentary told the story of the unsung hero, Charles Houston, and how he laid the groundwork for his student, Thurgood Marshall, to win the landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, ending segregation in schools. I came back to my father and told him, “I want to be a lawyer.” I did not fully understand an

attorney's job, but I saw parallels between my father and these legal giants. They were all hardworking, selfless, and improved the lives of others through service—I knew that was the kind of man I wanted to become.

The last step of the process is waxing the shoe. Here is where the payoff from one's hard work is received. Waxing the shoe involves rubbing the surface lightly with a bit of shoe polish, water, and a soft cloth. My dad taught me a process that takes more time than other methods, but the shine is much brighter and long-lasting. His technique, coined glass, involves wrapping the cloth around two fingers and methodically circling the entire surface until it appears as glossy as "glass." My father's approach emphasizes quality and ensures that the effort exerted endures.

My life to this point has been about serving my community in a way that creates lasting change. After earning my undergraduate degree, I went on to have a successful career as a Special Educator. Inspired to advocate for and serve children, I decided to join Teach for America after college. I was a Special Education teacher for two years in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Afterward, I served for five years with YES Prep Public Schools ("YES") in Houston, Texas. Through teaching, I was able to see first-hand how effective advocacy, policy, and the law could improve outcomes for underrepresented communities.

For example, in my first year working at YES, I had two tenth-grade students with intellectual disabilities. I still remember our first session together. I asked each of them, "What do you want to do when you graduate?" Thomas quietly replied, "I will work at my family's grocery store." Wilson shouted, "I will work with my father. He drives trucks!" With the help of their parents, teachers, and the surrounding community, I prepared Thomas and Wilson for those opportunities and more.

As I worked to build supports and train teachers around the school district, I found myself researching many legal statutes and cases. For instance, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Texas Education Code, and court opinions like the 2017 Supreme

Court ruling in *Endrew F.* I would reference these laws as authority for the rigorous Individual Educational Plans that I proposed. I also used them to push for greater access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities.

All of that hard work paid off throughout the years. In particular, Thomas and Wilson both participated in YES's annual Senior Signing Day—an event where the entire YES community packs the Toyota Center, home of the Houston Rockets, and students announce their post-graduation plans. I will never forget Thomas and Wilson walking across the stage, standing in front of the microphone, and declaring, “[I am going to] Texas A&M University!”

As a young boy working with my father, as a teacher, and as a future attorney—I am passionate about serving my community. This passion is why I have dedicated my life to advocating for equal access. My passion and dedication have guided my young legal career. For example, last year, I served my peers as vice president of the 1L class, my country as a federal judicial intern for the Honorable Alfred H. Bennett, and my state as a law clerk for Disability Rights Texas. Last semester, I interned with the Los Angeles 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games. One of my projects was to draft the Supplier Diversity Policy—ensuring that minority, women, LGBTQ+, and disabled-owned businesses have increased access to contracts with LA28. Currently, I am a LexisNexis fellow working on a project aimed at ending systemic racism within the legal profession. It would be an honor to have the support of Terry Bryant as I continue my journey to serve others through legal advocacy.