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LDF Announces Inaugural Cohort of Groundbreaking Marshall-Motley Scholars Program

Today, on the 67th anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the [NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.](#) (LDF) announced the inaugural 10-person cohort of the [Marshall Motley-Scholars Program](#) (MMSP). Launched in January 2021, LDF's groundbreaking pipeline program will endow the South with the next generation of civil rights lawyers trained to provide legal advocacy of unparalleled excellence. Scholars pledge to devote the first eight years of their career to practicing civil rights law in service of Black communities in the South. The program is named in honor of Supreme Court justice, legendary civil rights attorney, and LDF founder Thurgood Marshall, and iconic civil rights litigator and the first Black woman to serve as a federal judge, Constance Baker Motley.

The [first-ever Marshall-Motley Scholars](#) and their hometowns are as follows:

- **Dominique Erney**, Gainesville, Florida
- **Ashley Fox**, Nashville, Tennessee
- **Briana Hayes**, Baxley, Georgia
- **Princess Jefferson**, Houston, Texas
- **Kendell Long**, Dallas, Texas
- **Victor Olofin**, Loxahatchee, Florida
- **Markus Reneau**, New Orleans, Louisiana
- **Traelon Rodgers**, Dallas, Texas
- **Shandrea Sellers**, Montgomery, Alabama
- **Maydrian Strozier-Lowe**, St. Louis, Missouri

“LDF is honored to introduce our first Marshall-Motley Scholars, a cohort of immensely talented and passionate students committed to bringing about racial justice in the South. We received hundreds of impressive applications after launching the MMSP earlier this year and it was difficult reducing that number to the 10 Scholars we have selected. It is clear by the popularity of the MMSP that our nation is replete with passionate individuals seeking to create change,” said **LDF President and Director-Counsel Sherrilyn Ifill**. “The MMSP launched at just the right moment in our history, as the rights of Black people in the U.S. and the power our communities have amassed have come under renewed attack. As we have seen over the last several months, our democracy requires vigilant protection, particularly for Black communities in the South, which have yet to realize the full and unqualified protection of this nation’s laws and ideals. The inaugural MMSP cohort, and those that will follow it, will play a key role in addressing these constantly evolving threats to democracy and justice. We are proud of these 10 Scholars and look forward to supporting

them in carrying on the legacies of Thurgood Marshall and Constance Baker Motley and the many unsung heroes of civil rights advocacy.”

The inaugural cohort is a stellar collection of individuals committed to racial justice and equality. Each of the 10 Scholars is either from the South or was raised in the region. Notable distinctions about the cohort include Congressional Black Caucus and White House Interns; the youngest Board Member in the history of NAACP National Board; Black Student Union presidents; former ACLU and Equal Justice Initiative interns; veteran educators (including an Assistant Principal); and an American Constitution Society Fellow. Bios for the 10 scholars can be found [here](#).

“We are thrilled to welcome the inaugural cohort of the Marshall-Motley Scholars Program into the LDF family and to assist in their development as civil rights attorneys who will advance the rights of Black people in the United States well into the future. Our first 10 Scholars are brilliant, dedicated leaders eager to serve the communities of the South,” said **Janai Nelson, LDF’s Associate Director-Counsel**. “One of the key aspects of the MMSP is the elimination of financial barriers for our Scholars by fully covering the cost of law school and attendant expenses. This is a vital step in enabling our Scholars to pursue their careers as civil rights advocates unencumbered by the mounting student debt crisis in this country, while also providing them professional development experiences to equip them to become impactful civil rights lawyers. We look forward to working closely with them to help develop their tremendous potential to be the leaders our country needs and ones that will fight for equity and justice for Black communities across the South.”

Over the next five years, LDF’s MMSP will invest in the education and training of a total of 50 aspiring civil rights attorneys to advocate on behalf of Black communities in the South seeking racial justice and equity. Scholars will be afforded a full law school scholarship for tuition, room and board, and incidentals to alleviate the debt burden that can prevent future lawyers from pursuing a career as a civil rights attorney; summer internships with national and regional civil rights organizations with offices in the South focused on racial justice to jumpstart training in civil rights law; a two-year postgraduate fellowship at civil rights law organizations in the South fighting to achieve racial justice; and access to special trainings sponsored by LDF and the National Academy of Sciences.

The MMSP comes at a time when Black students are facing more barriers than ever to attend law school. [Studies](#) show that [the cost](#) of a private law school education has grown by a whopping 175% since 1985. According to the [American Bar Association](#), student loans take a disproportionate toll on lawyers of color, often forcing them to take unwanted career paths. The support offered by the MMSP is an intentional effort to address the racial and economic barriers that often deter students from pursuing their dreams of becoming civil rights attorneys, and a targeted effort to support the civil rights ecosystem in the South.

“Congratulations to the inaugural Marshall-Motley Scholars – an impressive collection of brilliant young minds and inspiring future leaders. Their passion for their communities and readiness to do the hard work of racial justice are clear,” said **Joel Motley, son of Judge Constance Baker Motley**. These first 10 Scholars are exactly what our country needs in its next generation of civil rights lawyers. As my mother knew all too well and as we see still today, the struggle for justice is unrelenting. In the few months since LDF launched the MMSP, we have seen increasing attacks on civil and human rights – from voter suppression

laws to the criminalization of the First Amendment right to protest. I am encouraged to know that these Scholars will carry on my mother's work and represent communities in the South with pride, diligence, and the vision needed to reshape our nation."

"I am excited to welcome the inaugural cohort of Marshall-Motley Scholars and to entrust them with this opportunity to preserve and expand LDF's rich legacy of pursuing racial justice in the South on behalf of Black communities," said **Jino Ray, LDF's Director of the Marshall-Motley Scholars Program**. "The Scholars enter this stage following in the legacy of LDF's 81-year-long history of monumental legal victories that removed some of the most significant structural and foundational barriers preventing progress for Black Americans—particularly in the South. Collectively, they bring with them passion and a bright light of hope that inspires us to reimagine what 'liberty and justice for all' could really look like in America. The Scholars also represent an opportunity to extend the fight for racial justice in the South to all corners of the region so that every community is equally represented."

"I am so excited to see this inaugural cohort of Marshall-Motley Scholars. These 10 new future leaders will become leading civil right attorneys across the South and our nation dedicated to the fight for racial justice and equity," said **Columbia, South Carolina, mayor Steve Benjamin**. "As we have seen this year, the rights and protections afforded Black communities are under a relentless wave of attacks, especially in the area of voting rights where a slew of voter suppression bills have been introduced, including here in South Carolina. We must redouble our efforts to provide the South with the legal minds needed to preserve and protect the rights of all Americans. In the spirit of Marshall, Motley, Julius Chambers and so many others, I am excited that the Scholars have joined this fight."

Biographies for Inaugural MMSP Cohort

Scholar Name: Dominique Erney

Dominique Erney is from Gainesville, Florida. As a student at Harvard University, she sought to educate herself thoroughly on the systemic and historic anti-Black racism in America and gain the skills to dismantle it to make room for a new world. She is driven by the pursuit of racial justice for Black people. Dominique has held internship positions with the ACLU National Prison Project and Justice Policy Institute. Additionally, she was co-chair of Black at Brennan – an internal employee affinity group – where she helped to lead organization-wide and management-level conversations about how the Brennan Center should address systemic racism both externally and internally.

Dominique intends on returning to the South to work on behalf of Black Americans to reimagine the criminal legal system. She will utilize law school to peel back the layers of how racial inequity plays out in society and gain more tools as a changemaker to dismantle unjust systems.

Scholar Name: Ashley Fox

Born and raised in Nashville, Tennessee, Ashley Fox proudly traces her roots to the Mississippi Delta. She attended Washington University where she earned numerous awards and scholarships and held leadership positions within the Association of Black Students. She has a profound passion for racial justice. She has identified numerous disparities facing the Black community, including the grief of premature deaths, income

disparities, voter suppression, and more. The human cost of such conditions for Black people – particularly in the South – results in Ashley’s commitment to pursuing the practice of civil rights law.

Ashley is currently the co-director of New Leaders Council, D.C., where she helps to equip and train progressive leaders with skills to advocate, run campaigns, and mobilize networks for diverse causes. She aims to empower Black people to live authentically and work to positively transform their community. Ultimately, she wants to be a leader that loudly advocates for the cause most important to her – racial justice for Black people in the United States.

Scholar Name: Briana Hayes

Briana Hayes derives much of her inspiration from childhood growing up in Baxley, Georgia, where she witnessed racism in her classroom as a child and how it negatively impacted so many students. This gave her the zeal that would catapult her passion for social change forever.

At the University of Georgia, Briana joined a research team focused on rural Black students on their pathways to higher education, resulting in her work on an intervention that will land more rural Black students in four-year institutions across the South. She also founded Appling Vanguard – an organization that helped Appling County work towards social justice and equality. Briana’s political activism was motivated by the death of Ahmaud Arbery, who was killed in the very judicial circuit in which she lives. After working as a community organizer for the Jon Ossoff U.S. Senate campaign, Briana went on to found 12Tomorrow – a grassroots organization that works to improve Black voter turnout in Georgia’s 12th Congressional district.

Briana firmly believes that her life’s purpose is to fight for freedom. As a civil rights attorney, Briana aims to practice law with dignity and protect everyone’s rights in South Georgia.

Scholar Name: Princess Jefferson

Princess Jefferson is from Houston, Texas. As a full-time student at Bryn Mawr College, Princess worked 30-hour weeks between 3-5 jobs to provide for her family in Houston. During this time, she continued to excel in her political science academic endeavors and maintain involvement in various organizations on campus. Princess is a first-generation college graduate.

She worked as a social justice outreach consultant for the Career and Civic Engagement Center at Bryn Mawr College. In this role, she worked to increase student activism within the community and develop a social justice framework for the college. She also assisted in re-founding the NAACP chapter at Bryn Mawr and served as its co-president. Princess served as the director of field operations for the judicial campaign for Te’iva Bell in Houston by coordinating voter awareness activities within the community and helping to register people to vote. She is currently a Chapters Fellow at the American Constitution Society – one of only three Black members within the organization – where she assists in coordinating the logistics, funding, and virtual planning on current issues in law for student and lawyer chapters nationwide.

Princess is eager to continue her work in advocacy of social and racial justice. Her passion lies at the heart of bridging structural barriers between underserved groups and resources. She remains committed to uplifting civil rights in addition to promoting equity, equality, and inclusion in the Black community.

Scholar Name: Kendell Long

Kendell Long is a Dallas, Texas native. Growing up in a state with one of the highest incarceration rates in the country inspired his interest in criminal justice. He attended Georgetown University where he held many leadership positions in their local chapter of the NAACP, including co-president and vice president. At Georgetown, Kendell worked with the Georgetown 272 Advocacy Team to mobilize his student body to vote and pressure their administrators to approve the creation of a fund to provide financial compensation to communities descending from those sold and enslaved by Georgetown. He currently works as a paralegal at the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, where he supports and impacts litigation that challenge the conditions of incarcerated D.C residents – who are disproportionately Black.

Kendell's commitment to racial justice stems from the belief that his existence is tied to his community. He believes that technology will further current criminal justice reforms like promoting fair sentencing and ending cash bail. Kendell will use the law to achieve racial justice for Black communities in the South through criminal justice reform.

Scholar Name: Victor Olofin

Victor Olofin is a South Florida native who graduated from Florida State University, where he studied political science. His interest in civil rights law is rooted in his experiences and understanding that power and representation has always been scarce for Black people in America, particularly in the South.

Victor served the Urban League of Tallahassee as an emergency manager. He also dedicated many of his weekends to volunteering for the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation, where he assisted attorneys in helping low-income Atlantans with landlord-tenant disputes. Victor currently works as the Gaining Opportunity From Arrest to Reentry (GOFAR) paralegal for the Orleans Public Defenders, where he helps his team to mitigate collateral consequences of conviction for formerly incarcerated people in Louisiana.

Victor views the South as his home and is dedicated to breaking down institutional barriers in the South with knowledge, compassion, and purpose. He plans to use a law degree to bring much needed change to the criminal justice system that disproportionately targets Black people in America.

Scholar Name: Markus Reneau

Markus Reneau was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. He is a Hurricane Katrina survivor, and a graduate of Yale. February 6, 2012, marks a trifecta of hallmarks for Markus. It was the day that Trayvon Martin was murdered. It was Markus's fifteenth birthday. And it was the start of his interest in civil rights litigation.

Attending Yale was a pathway that Markus never knew he had access to, and he demonstrated his passion for this opportunity through his service. At Yale, he joined the Urban Improvement Corps to provide tutoring to local children aspiring to attend college.

He also worked with a New Haven, Connecticut, tutoring program called Leadership, Education, and Athletics in Partnership (LEAP), which is founded on the belief that children learn in many ways aside from classroom instruction. He then studied abroad as a Yale Fellow with the Oakham School in England as the only Black faculty member and one of the only Black people in the town of Oakham.

As an investigator for the Orleans Public Defenders, Markus exercises his unique ability to navigate the cultural divide that often derails the progress of justice. In his role as a 2020 presidential election commissioner, he explained many details to Black people that would have otherwise prevented them from voting, including how to search the Louisiana voter database and helping voters to find their precinct, and assisting voters who needed to cast provisional ballots. His efforts to recognize the full humanity of Black people spurs his mission in fighting for justice.

Scholar Name: Traelon Rodgers

Traelon Rodgers is a Dallas, Texas, native with a remarkable history of civil justice advocacy. He graduated as valedictorian of his class at Dillard University where he was also the President of Student Government and a member of the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity.

Traelon's first call to action came in the form of marching, lobbying, and protesting as he sought justice in response to the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Most recently, Traelon's activism took the form of leadership as he stood in front of Dallas City Hall with youth from across the city in a student walkout. The act was a manifestation of his passion for educating the children of the United States – whom he recognizes as the leaders of today. Traelon currently serves as a member and an Assistant Secretary for the NAACP National Board; the youngest person to be elected as a national officer of the NAACP. He has been honored with the NAACP NYWC Chairman's Award, Texas NAACP State Conference Torch Bearers Award, and Overall Best Attorney Award at Rice University's mock trial tournament.

Traelon has long been committed to fighting for equality and justice in the South and remains driven by the ambition to fight daily for a place in the United States. He plans to leverage litigation as a tool to challenge the policies that negatively impact Black students in America.

Scholar Name: Shandrea Sellers

Shandrea Sellers is a Montgomery, Alabama, native and graduate of the University of Alabama. After completing her two-year commitment with Teach For America's Houston Corps at a Title I Public School in the South, Shandrea decided to continue her work in Texas far beyond her required stint.

Determined to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline found in predominantly Black schools, Shandrea has served in many educational roles in Houston. She is currently Assistant Principal at KIPP Sunnyside High School. Shandrea is dedicated to educational equity and has led the effort at her school to eliminate zero-tolerance policies that disproportionately affect Black male students.

Shandrea's constancy to the marginalized communities she serves blossoms from her dedication to people having choice-filled lives. She focuses on empowering students with opportunities for advocacy and agency. Shandrea remains committed to the pursuit of progress and seeks to affect change as a civil rights attorney to combat inequities in education, political reform, and more. Unwilling to compromise excellence, Shandrea remains steadfast in her commitment to the South. She devotedly continues her mission to create transformational change for future generations.

Scholar Name: Maydrian Strozier-Lowe

Maydrian Strozier-Lowe is a St. Louis, Missouri, native. While attending Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU), Maydrian studied the inner workings of government to better prepare himself for a career in law. His enthusiasm for political involvement and voting rights activism grew after watching his parents encounter a legal system rife with inequities and lawyers who worked against their interests. Maydrian's passion comes from knowing that a lawyer dedicated to another's life can enact tremendous change.

Maydrian simply believes that he is obligated to serve others. While attending PVAMU, he served as the chief of staff for the Student Government Association, as well as President of the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Rho Theta Chapter. He currently serves as a legislative assistant in the Texas House of Representatives for state representative Ron Reynolds. He works specifically on issues that disenfranchise Black people, including the right to vote, among other inequalities impacting the Black community. In association with the Political Science Posse at PVAMU, he organized three student marches that protested attempts by Waller County to discount and disenfranchise the student vote; LDF has filed a lawsuit against Waller County on behalf PVAMU students.

Maydrian aims to achieve substantial change for Black people in the South. He boldly promotes the idea of investing today for generations to come, as many once did for him.

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Founded in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) is the nation's first civil and human rights law organization. LDF has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights. LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund or LDF. Follow LDF on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#).