

Remarks by Amber A. Strickland, Recipient of the Oliver White Hill Law Student Pro Bono Award, Delivered at the Annual Meeting

Thank you, Dean Emery for that kind introduction.

To the members of the Virginia State Bar and Access to Legal Services Committee, thank you for selecting me to be this year's recipient of the Oliver Hill Student Pro Bono Award! It is an incredible honor to accept this award and to be here today.

“Each time a man stands up for an idea, or acts to improve the low of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.” – Robert F. Kennedy

This quote hangs on a wall at the bottom of the stairs of the UVA Law Library. I remember walking down the stairs of that library early in my 1L fall and seeing this quote. I was struck by the way it summed up the way I wanted to approach law school and my legal career.

This quote reminds me that the work of justice is a collective effort. None of us can accomplish our goals of reforming the criminal justice system, ensuring the protection of civil rights, or guaranteeing fair housing without relying on the work of others. But we aren't simply reliant on others to achieve our goals, we need each other to stay motivated and to stay in the fight.

I am incredibly humbled to receive this award because I can think of so many of my classmates whose work over the last three years motivated me to do more and to engage real people and real issues. I would not have had the law school career that I did if it were not for certain students and professors who encouraged me to stretch myself.

There's another group of people I need to thank – my family. My parents, Frank and Renee, are both here today. Like many others, I didn't just happen upon a desire to pursue a public interest career. Through their own commitments to service – in the military, government agencies, education, healthcare – my parents and grandparents taught me at a very young age that importance of service. For me, it was never a question of why public service, but why not public service? Because of their examples and encouragement, I pursued a legal career and made the choices I did throughout law school to not wait until after graduation to start giving back. Thank you, mom and dad, for your continuous examples of service before self.

This quote by Bobby Kennedy has been a source of encouragement not just because it reminds me that justice is a collective effort, but it has also served as a reminder to have hope. Each time I left the library I walked out remembering that the goal of justice is not an insurmountable one. Our individual paths may have many turns, but despite the obstacles or hardships we face ourselves or on behalf of our clients, together change is possible. Together we can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

I don't say all this as some eager new law school graduate – although that may be true. I say that because I have seen it. This quote is from a speech Robert Kennedy gave in Cape Town in 1966

at the height of apartheid. Less than two years ago, I sat in the Constitutional Court of South Africa and listened to the progress South Africa has made in defending human rights. Looking back to the states, when Kennedy gave this speech, my parents would not have been allowed to legally marry. And then, the next year, the Supreme Court ruled in *Loving v Virginia*, in many ways making it possible for me to be here today. Each of those currents of justice needed individuals to commit to creating ripples of change.

It is an honor to be here with you today and to accept this award. I hope that going forward we can each continue to forge the path of justice together.

Thank you.