CHARLES J. BEARD, II
DIVERSITY
FELLOWSHIP
FOLEY HOAG LLP

Talking Points: Deborah Williams

2022 CHARLES J. BEARD, II DIVERSITY FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT

Law student Deborah Williams has been selected as one of Foley Hoag's 2022 Charles J. Beard, II Diversity Fellowship recipients. Deborah graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara with a major in Political Science in 2020. She currently attends the Boston University School of Law as a Candidate for Juris Doctor. In this interview, Deborah shares her journey and experiences that shaped her into becoming the aspiring lawyer she is today.



What piqued your interest in law?

The way I was raised played an enormous part in my decision to study law. Growing up, my family instilled in me the importance of providing for people and giving back to our communities. But we didn't have any legal advocacy or access to legal resources and solutions to achieve our goals. The desire to close this gap spearheaded my decision to become a lawyer. I want to provide legal resources and solutions for underrepresented communities. This would allow me to continue the good work my family started but in a different way and through new avenues.

How has your work with the Students Against Sexual Assault (SASA) nonprofit helped you during your time at Foley Hoag?

Serving as President of SASA in Sacramento has shaped the type of attorney that I want to be. Through my work with this nonprofit, I quickly discovered flaws in the system that allow institutions to protect the abuser, the predator or the person in power who is often perpetuating the harm. This does a complete disservice to many people who have been harmed by sexual violence and harassment and inspired me to enact change through my legal career.

When I joined Foley Hoag I was aware of these institutional issues. The legal industry has a reputation for having archaic ideas and dated traditions, opinions, and perspectives. I thought I might see some of this at the firm, but in my personal experience, I have found the

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complete opposite to be true. Foley Hoag goes against the grain altogether — not only in the legal work they do with pro bono cases or client counseling, but also in the interpersonal day-to-day interactions between colleagues.

There's no hierarchy or power dynamic between me as a summer associate working with other associates or a partner on any task. I felt comfortable being a part of the firm and it made me want to bring more difficult conversations around sexual assault advocacy to the table. There's always more to do in terms of sexual assault prevention across the industry and I'm grateful to feel supported at Foley Hoag to do this important work.

Why is advancing DEI in the legal industry important to you?

People who are first-generation immigrants or those with disabilities have historically and systemically been part of suppressed communities. It's difficult for minorities like myself to feel like we have a support-system in the workplace that we can benefit from. When searching for law firms to work at this summer, I said to myself, 'I have to work somewhere where living and working is sustainable, where I can have mentors who are pouring into me, who are edifying me, who want to be there,' because if they want to be there for me, then that makes me want to be here for the firm, my colleagues and my clients.

I was pleasantly surprised by the intentionality that I was met with at Foley Hoag. I've felt listened to and that's something that a lot of Black women don't get to experience. Being heard and having people act on the feedback, suggestions, constructive criticism and honest storytelling of our experiences are often ignored, dismissed, and minimized. The care that Foley Hoag has for advancing DE&I is very non-performative. They're not looking for a pat on the back as so many firms are. It's very refreshing and encouraging to be somewhere where DE&I is not just for the numbers or the accolades, it's genuinely part of their mission. The firm as a community and culture of people have moved the needle of where their ethics, morals and values lie.

During your time at Foley Hoag, what did you want to achieve?

As a summer associate, I wanted to be somewhere where I was being mentored, heard and given a lot of opportunities to make mistakes and grow as a result of them. I learn best by diving headfirst into the deep end and I think that Foley Hoag gives you the opportunity to do so while still providing a lifeline for help.

My goal for the summer was to be an effective and efficient apprentice under helpful and well-rounded mentors and attorneys and I was able to achieve that during my time at Foley Hoag. Throughout my many assignments, my mentors consistently challenged me to take my analysis further, showing that they trusted me and recognized my improvement.

What about Foley Hoag drew you in?

At my interview back in January, I was happily met with people who allowed me to really be my full self throughout the interview process. Even in a professional setting, I was still able to let parts of myself and my personality shine through. Foley Hoag's ability to create this incredibly comfortable environment where no one is exactly the same, but everyone complements each other, is something I really enjoyed. Everyone has something different to offer: a personality type, a communication style, an interest and I think Foley Hoag is an extremely well-rounded firm that brings out the best in me. The firm teaches us that our morals and values are not to be compromised all while helping its associates meet the expectations that come with being an attorney.