



LegalWriting
institute

LWI LIVES

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A note from the Co-Chairs:

In this Issue, we wanted to honor Black History Month by featuring three legal writing professors of color. While we always strive to select diverse professors for our editions, for this February release, we felt it was especially important to focus on professors of color exclusively. We hope you enjoy learning more about Aysha, Beverly, and Nelia—three women who undoubtedly contribute to the making of Black History.

LWI Lives is a regular electronic publication of the “Faces of LWI” Committee, which explores and communicates the emerging identity of LWI and its members. We have in common the commitment to being the best legal writing professors that we can be. But we are multidimensional people with different strengths, interests, curiosities, and gifts. By profiling individuals in our community, we hope to expand and develop our understanding of who we are and what we aspire to be.

Aysha Ames: A Professor Grows in Brooklyn



By Abigail Perdue

Professor Aysha Ames is a proud and enthusiastic Brooklynite. She lives in a trendy walk-up just ten minutes away from Brooklyn Law School where she teaches legal research and writing. She fearlessly cruises through the NYC streets on a Revel Scooter, and having just obtained her motorcycle license, she plans to purchase a Vespa in the near future to traverse the city or even occasionally escape it.

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Beverly Duréus: Champion of Firsts



By Wayne Schiess

Beverly Caro Duréus is a warm, funny person with a humble demeanor, and she has enough achievements, accolades, and “firsts” to fill two résumés. She is now working on her third résumé, and this probably won’t be her last act, either.

Beverly was born and raised in Kansas City, Kansas, the youngest of five children in “a well-respected family of over-achievers.” Her family had strong

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Nelia Robbi: From Goat Farm and Harlequin Romance to Law Firm and Law Teaching



By Desmond Wu

You can’t judge a book by its cover. The same goes for a Harlequin romance novel, which tends to provoke strong assumptions in most people while few seek to understand much beyond those initial assumptions. Nelia Robbi’s story is much the same.

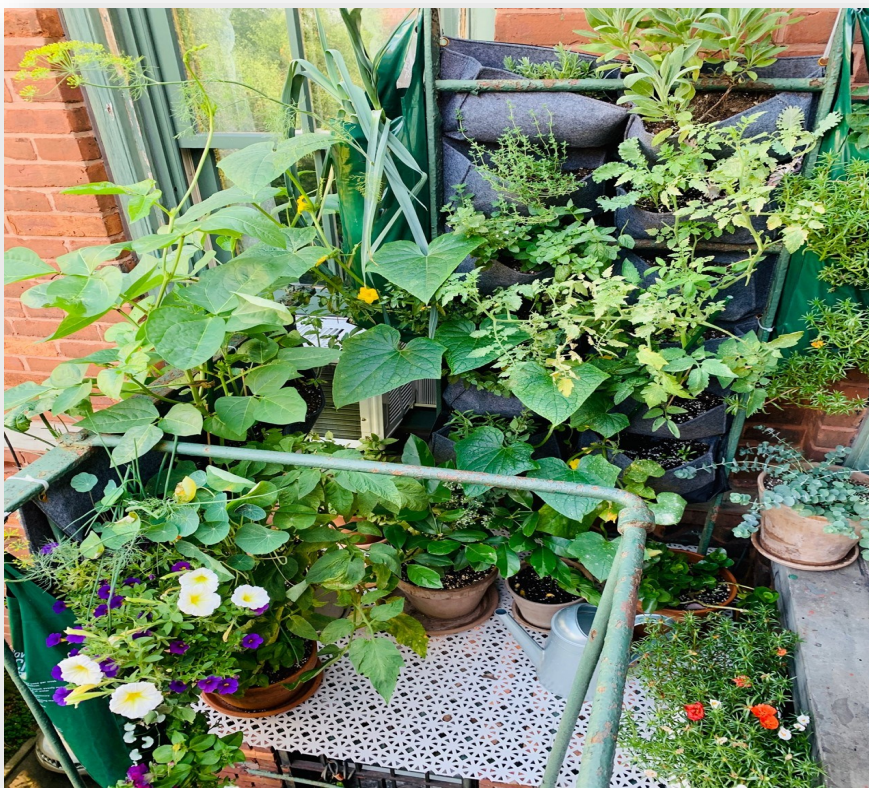
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Aysha Ames

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When she's not teaching, writing, or zipping through the streets, you might find her destressing through an at-home session of Baptiste hot yoga, which she is certified to teach, or Zooming with anxious clients of Yogalese, LLC—the “yoga law” consulting firm she founded in 2016, which advises yoga studios nationwide on wide-ranging issues from tax to torts.

But Ames wasn't always a street-savvy city yoganista. Indeed, her childhood home could not have been more far removed from the hustle and bustle of New York's concrete jungle. Instead, she came of age in the tiny “oyster town” of Port Norris, New Jersey, which is situated on the Delaware coast at the mouth of the Maurice River. Home to less than 1400 people, Port Norris was the kind of slow and sleepy township where stop lights and locked doors are deemed unnecessary and where all too many dreams go unrealized.



Aysha's City Garden

Once reliant on seafood for its livelihood, Port Norris residents—most of whom have lived there for generations—possess an unusual appreciation for and connection to nature, especially the water. Still today, Ames feels that distinct pull. A green thumb who has recently explored floral design, she grows a vegetable and herb garden on her terrace and volunteers at a community farm in Brooklyn that provides fresh vegetables to low-income people.

Growing up in Port Norris didn't just foster a spirit of stewardship and self-reliance in Ames, but it also instilled the importance of faith and family. Ames descends from a man who had been enslaved by Jesuit priests at Georgetown College but escaped before he could be sold to a southern plantation. His incredible story of survival was almost lost to history.

His direct descendant—Ames' paternal grandmother—was one of eight sisters who had somehow convinced their accommodating husbands to build homes side by side along a single street in the middle of Port Norris. Ames and her younger brother grew up just around the corner surrounded by a close-knit, loving, and involved group of aunts, uncles, and cousins. Still today, the influence of these strong and intelligent matriarchs and their unwavering Christian faith have shaped who Ames is and how she approaches life.

Aysha Ames

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But it was Ames' mother who was perhaps the most influential matriarch of all. Mrs. Ames was a courageous "influencer" long before that term came in vogue. Dedicated to achieving racial justice and equality, she worked for an impactful literacy initiative established by Coretta Scott King. It aimed to help students hone their literacy skills, provide opportunities to meaningfully explore African-American history and culture, and to honor the lasting legacy of King's late husband, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As part of this noble and important work, Mrs. Ames helped integrate a formerly all-white school. But she was not the only civil rights crusader in her household. Her husband, Mr. Ames, was also an activist for racial equality and justice, organizing marches and movements throughout his life. The Ames' commitment to civil rights irrevocably impacted their daughter, planting the seed for her future career as a civil rights attorney and legal educator.



Aysha's extended family

Yet even as a little girl, Ames knew that Port Norris was simply too small for her big dreams. Despite being surrounded by a network of extended family and enjoying ample time for introspection, small town life sometimes still felt lonely, stifling, and isolating.

So, at 18, Ames left home and attained her Bachelor's Degree and a Master's in Education from Rutgers University. Perhaps influenced by her mother's long-time involvement in education, Ames became an elementary school math teacher. She learned valuable lessons about student engagement and pedagogy that she still applies today, and as an added bonus, befriended a colleague who, to this day, remains one of her closest friends, confidantes, and cheerleaders. Although Ames enjoyed teaching, she had considered law school and finally took the plunge. She returned to her alma mater Rutgers to attain her law degree. While there, she was taught, inspired, and changed by LWI icon Ruth Anne Robbins.

The love of learning, respect for others, and desire to achieve racial equality fostered by her parents, faith, and family prompted Ames to apply for a position at the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in Philadelphia, where her younger brother and beloved four-year-old niece still reside. OCR's mission is to "ensure equal access to education and to promote educational excellence throughout the nation through vigorous enforcement of civil rights." At OCR, Ames strived to give marginalized and underrepresented people a voice. During that enriching, albeit emotionally difficult, experience, she learned that at base, people all want the same thing—to feel respected and

Aysha Ames

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Aysha with her mother

heard. This all-important lesson still shapes how she interacts with colleagues and students. As a result, she creates an inclusive learning environment by developing close relationships with students, listening to them, and understanding the importance of how she makes them feel. She also weaves anti-racism, diversity, and inclusion initiatives into her classes year-round.

Although her work at OCR was fulfilling, Ames is a person who unabashedly “lives in the moment.” An entrepreneurial and curious spirit, she is unafraid to try new things or take a leap of faith. So, when Brooklyn Law School posted a vacancy, she jumped at the chance. A few months later, she found herself searching unsuccessfully for affordable housing in the highly sought-after neighborhood of Brooklyn Heights. But with the easy optimism and faith in others that has become her signature, she leased an apartment from a total stranger sight unseen based on little more than his assertion that the apartment would be unavailable the next day unless she “Venmoed” him \$500 that night. A risk-taker whose long shots have usually paid off, she rolled the dice, sent the money, and a few days later, found herself moving into a fabulous space that was the only newly renovated apartment in the entire building!

And those same qualities of mindfulness, risk-taking, and adaptability have served her well in 2020. Ames had less than a year of law teaching under her belt before the pandemic forced her to pivot to teaching online. But Ames has found the COVID-related course interruption “invigorating,” in part because it has deepened her “profound respect” for and commitment to students completing their degrees during this strange and stressful time.

Having successfully transitioned from small-town girl to savvy Brooklynite while still preserving a strong sense of self, Ames doesn’t yet know what the future holds, except that it promises many exciting chances that she won’t be afraid to take.

You can reach Aysha at aysha.ames@brooklaw.edu and visit her faculty profile at <https://www.brooklaw.edu/Contact-Us/Ames-Aysha>.

Beverly Duréus

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roots in Kansas, where her mother had a career in nursing and her father worked for the Ralston Purina Company in Kansas City, Missouri. Her maternal grandmother was an educator, and the family members are descendants of the first African-American student to attend the University of Kansas.

True to family tradition, Beverly excelled at her magnet high school for the arts and sciences, where she was class secretary. She loved being a performer and dreamed of a career in theater. But after high school, when she enrolled at Drake University in Iowa, her parents encouraged her to pursue something other than theater. Beverly knew immediately what it should be. She had known since third grade that she wanted to be a trial lawyer. “It was just in me,” she says.



Portrait of a Champion

Naturally then, after finishing college she went to law school. Despite initially planning to attend an elite eastern law school—or at least, to transfer there after one year—she ultimately attended law school at a place she loved: Drake. That decision made her happy and would pay dividends later. At Drake Law, Beverly was one of only four Black students in her entering class of 186, and she carried on the family tradition of high achievement: She was a member of the Dean’s list, the first African-American president of the moot court board, an officer in the Phi Alpha Delta legal fraternity, a member of the school’s national and mid-west moot court teams, and graduated as a member of the Order of the Barristers.

After clerking at the Iowa Civil Rights Commission and interning for Chief Judge William Stuart of the United States District Court for the Southern District of Iowa, Beverly ultimately pursued a legal career in Dallas, Texas. “I wanted to get away from the ice and snow,” she says. From among several offers, she chose the law firm of Gardere & Wynne (later Gardere Wynne Sewell and which has now merged into Foley & Lardner). Beverly was the first African-American lawyer the firm had ever hired.

At the firm, Beverly worked in a trial practice, primarily on the defense side, and was on the path to partnership when Drake University School of Law reached out to her and offered her the chance to teach Evidence as well as first-year Legal Writing and Civil Procedure for one year. Of course, she wanted to embrace this opportunity, which would make her Drake Law’s first full-time African-American faculty member, but she didn’t want to sacrifice her successful legal career and the potential for partnership. What she needed was a leave of absence from the firm. Gardere & Wynne had never given an attorney a one-year leave. But now it gave one to Beverly—the first leave of absence ever granted to a firm associate.

After a year in academia, which she loved, she began to wonder if the “crazy hours” she was working at a large law firm were what she really wanted. She decided to leave Gardere & Wynne and join Chapman & Reese, a defense-oriented litigation boutique in Dallas. There, true to form, she became the firm’s first female shareholder. She also became a visible leader in the J.L. Turner Legal Association, a member of the Dallas Bar Association, and president of the Dallas Black Women’s Bar.

Beverly Duréus

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That's a pretty good résumé right there: college, law school, successful lawyer, law-firm shareholder, and bar leader. But hold on.

In 1994, something momentous happened that changed Beverly's life, and it began with another achievement on the horizon. She was placed on the short list for a judicial appointment by Texas Governor Ann Richards. That appointment would have made her the first African-American female state district court (non-family law) civil trial judge in Dallas.

But one day, as she contemplated the opportunities before her and the future possibilities, "God spoke to me," she says, "and I knew I had to take a different path." Despite naysaying from her friends, she withdrew her name as a potential judicial nominee and committed herself to pursuing Christian ministry. That path has shaped Beverly's life ever since, leading to more achievement, more opportunities, and also to a family. And one more thing: After her decision to enter the ministry, Beverly was surprised and thrilled to learn that some of her maternal ancestors had come to North America not as slaves but as Christian missionaries from Madagascar. It is a point of deep meaning and pride for her.



Beverly and her Family

So she pivoted—and started a second résumé. She earned a master's degree at Dallas Theological Seminary, where she met and worked with Rev. Edsel Duréus, who was also pursuing a master's degree in theology and who regularly engaged in short-term mission trips, which Beverly also joined. Their relationship grew, and Edsel and Beverly eventually married.

Beverly went on to earn her Doctor of Ministry from the Perkins School of Theology at SMU in Dallas (hence her official designation: Beverly Caro Duréus, Esq., Th.M., D.Min.). Edsel holds a doctorate from DTS as well, and they are both ordained ministers. Beverly is the first female to become an ordained pastor in a Bible Fellowship Church. The Duréuses have been operating their church and ministry for the last 16 years in Cedar Hill, Texas—located in southwest Dallas County.

Beverly Duréus

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While pursuing her advanced degrees and committing herself to ministry, Beverly also re-entered legal academia as a legal-writing teacher at SMU Dedman School of Law. As a full-time Clinical Professor of Legal Research, Writing and Advocacy, she teaches two sections of Legal Research, Writing and Advocacy, and she co-teaches the school's Federal Judicial Externship Class with the Honorable A. Joe Fish, Senior Judge for the Northern District of Texas. She loves teaching, loves her students, and believes that her role is to "cause them to learn." And, she admits, recalling her high school days as a performer, "I'm a bit dramatic and corny in the classroom, and we laugh a lot. Law school is tense enough, so I try to make it fun and to keep my students encouraged."

She has now been teaching legal writing for 20 years, and for the 2019-20 academic year, she was a nominee for the SMU Provost's Teacher of the Year Award. In addition to teaching, she serves others, of course. She's faculty advisor to the Christian Legal Society and the Black Law Students Association. (I met Beverly as the unflappable co-coordinator of SMU's One-Day Workshop in 2019.)

And although SMU does not require legal-writing faculty to publish scholarship, she does it anyway, focusing on the intersection of law and theology. A recent publication is *Shades of Theology in Suits Affecting the Parent-Child Relationship: A Tribute Honoring the Memory of Professor Joseph W. McKnight*, 71 SMU L. Rev. 339 (2018).

Beverly and Edsel have a son, Edsel Duréus II, who did "a COVID-style high school graduation" in 2020. He, like his mother, is a high achiever, lettering in track and being selected for National Honor Society as well as earning the title of "Most Charming Male Senior." He is now a freshman at Oral Roberts University and dreams of becoming an attorney. Beverly and her family love to travel and have visited Africa and the Caribbean, combining much of their travel with Christian ministry.

Along with her academic career and her family, Beverly works as the pastor of women's and children's ministries and overseas Christian education at her church, which continues operating despite having no onsite meetings since March 2020 due to Covid-19. She also operates Katallasso (Greek for "reconciliation") Enterprises™ which includes Katallasso Ministries International™ and Katallasso Alternative Dispute Resolutions™. K-ADR™ helps parties resolve disputes according to Biblical principles. A woman of great faith, she credits Jesus Christ for her success. And yes, she also preaches a good sermon.

It's a remarkable second résumé.

Holiday Island



But wait. There's more. Beverly is the co-author of *Holiday Island*, a delightful children's book, and most recently was a contributing author for *Lessons from Successful African American Lawyers*, edited by Evangeline V. Mitchell, Esq. Both are available on Amazon. Looks like her third résumé will be just as illustrious as the first two!

You can contact Beverly at bdureus@smu.edu and visit her faculty profile page at <https://www.smu.edu/Law/Faculty/Profiles/Dureus-Beverly-C>.

Nelia Robbi

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Nelia and Her Family



From growing up on a goat farm in rural New Jersey, to working as an editorial assistant at Harlequin in New York City, to raising her green-eyed son Patrik with her Swedish husband Markus in Austin while teaching legal writing at the University of Texas Law School, Nelia Robbi's story is deeper than the assumptions others have made based solely on her appearance.

Nelia grew up on a goat farm in rural New Jersey. Her white parents have a biological daughter, and they adopted her and her brother. Her mom was the first female mayor of the small township where they lived. So, through grade school, Nelia was the "mayor's daughter." It wasn't any big city mayoral position, to be sure, but having mom as the mayor meant that Nelia always knew that women like her and her mom could be and do anything they wanted to. She spent her childhood going to school, helping to raise goats, and doing other chores on the farm. She was part of a pony club, and she loved riding horses and writing. Being around animals fueled her desire to become a vet, but her love of reading made her also want to be a writer. In the end, her distaste of math and her love of literature meant that she majored in English.

Growing up, her mom taught her to always speak up. As a feminist living through the civil rights movement, her mother marched in Alabama and heard Martin Luther King Jr. speak. She has been Nelia's role model in terms of speaking up for what's right and speaking out against injustice. When her mom did speak up, she always made it look easy. Nelia remembers going to Carnegie Mellon for a college admissions interview with her mom during the Clarence Thomas hearings. While they were sitting next to each other in the waiting room, a man in the room started talking about the confirmation hearings, dismissing Anita Hill and her claims as ridiculous. As he went on, Nelia could feel her Mom start shaking in her chair. Eventually, she stood up, confronted him, and told him off as Nelia shrank further and further down into her chair. When Nelia was called for her interview, the man in the waiting room turned out to be her interviewer.

While she was accepted at Carnegie Mellon, she ended up attending Wesleyan, completing a creative writing program there and writing a semi-autobiographical account of her childhood. As part of that project, she learned more about her parents' experience going through the adoption process to adopt her and her brother. Everyone has their own unique lived experiences and she's seen how you can grow up next to someone who's the same color but have different lived experiences. She has seen how her brother has had a much harder time as a Black male than she has as a lighter skinned Black woman, or her sister as a white woman. She has seen firsthand the different shades of colorism in society.

Nelia Robbi

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One thing Nelia has struggled with is feeling like she fits in to different groups. “There’s always been an expectation that I’ve had certain experiences because of how I look,” Nelia said. She grew up with white parents and a white sister in rural New Jersey, where most of her friends were white. She says with a laugh that her son Patrik has blond hair and green eyes, and he loves baseball and Minecraft. This is different than what others have assumed about her based on her skin color. At every school she’s attended, she’s been a member of the Black student’s association, but she has sometimes felt like an outsider because others have had shared experiences growing up that she never had. She’s also faced biased assumptions based on how she looks, having experienced her fair share of racism throughout her life. “I’ve been called horrible things and, when you look and speak a certain way, then you’re often ‘acceptable’ or ‘well spoken,’ and that doesn’t feel good either.”

After graduating from Wesleyan, she went to work in publishing in New York City after graduating. One of her good friends in college had a mother who was a romance writer, and she helped Nelia get an interview at Harlequin, one of the largest publishers of romance novels. When Nelia got the job, she moved to New York to work as an editorial assistant.

Moving and adjusting to living in New York City went fairly smoothly. In many ways, moving to New York didn’t feel all that strange or overwhelming since she grew up so close to it. Her home and high school were in New Jersey about an hour away, and Wesleyan was about two hours away. Many of her high school and college friends had also moved to New York, so she had a solid support system in place. Her husband, Markus, who she met while at Wesleyan, moved with her to New York where they lived together. Like her, Markus doesn’t fit into most assumptions people tend to make about him. Although he’s white, he’s an immigrant from Sweden, having moved to the United States when he was 8 years old. He did not learn to speak English until after he arrived.

He worked in consulting, so he was always traveling across the country, while Nelia’s work as an editorial assistant had her making flight and hotel reservations. The job at Harlequin was the first time she worked in an environment with a lot of oversight and where her work product was expected to be perfect. For example, she would have to submit requests for time off in writing to her supervisor, and that supervisor returned one of her requests redlined. She laughs and remembers wondering, “What am I supposed to do with this now? Does this mean I get the time off?” This is the same attention to detail and care that she instills in her students, many of whom, like her, are entering her class fresh out of college.



Nelia skiing with her Family

Nelia Robbi

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*Nelia at home
with her Family*



After a few years in New York, she and her family moved to Austin, Texas where her husband got a job at a startup technology company. His parents had also moved there. She continued freelancing for Harlequin and began volunteering at SafePlace, a non-profit dedicated to serving women, children, and men affected by sexual and domestic violence. She eventually worked there as a legal advocate, representing survivors in the judicial system as a social worker. That experience led her to apply to law school to work in public interest. Her family members also all have advanced degrees—her dad has a Ph.D. and her mom, sister, and brother all have master's degrees. So, although there was never any pressure to get an advanced degree, they led by example, and she followed suit.

She attended the University of Texas School of Law, which was her first experience in a large state school. Growing up, she had always attended small schools. Her elementary school was a Kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school. Then, she attended the day program at a small private high school with an enrollment of around 800 students, and then went to Wesleyan, a university with around 3,000 full-time undergraduate students. Even so, she loved law school and the sense of community in her class of around 300. This sense of community was something she had never felt in her previous schools. She joined a book club as a student with her friends, and that club is still going strong even now, although she says with a laugh that the book club is usually a wine club also.

Having worked as an assistant and as a legal advocate, she treated law school the same way she treated her full-time job. She continued to freelance for Harlequin in her first year, writing jacket copy for books. She started law school a little later than the average law student, so she focused on doing things that would help her become a better advocate, such as enrolling in a domestic violence clinic, an environmental law clinic, and a children's rights clinic. She also did volunteer legal services and walk-in legal clinics as part of her membership of the Lloyd Lochridge American Inn of Court.

She loved these experiences because she was doing legal work and representing clients as a law student. She wanted to go to law school to advocate for others, and clinics gave her the chance to do so in a real-life setting. Another highlight was her summer spent in a prosecution internship in Austin. When she went to court as an intern, she already knew all of the judges and courtroom personnel because she went to court as part of her work at SafePlace. As a prosecutor, she saw the courtroom from a different viewpoint, and she witnessed the different impact her power as a prosecutor had in that role.

In her second year, people on campus were registering for on-campus interviews for law firms, so she joined in. Up to that point, she had experience in public interest and government, but not in private practice, so the interview process gave her a glimpse into law firm life. She remembers

Nelia Robbi

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that almost every single interviewer asked about her experience at Harlequin. She says, with a laugh, that Harlequin is probably one reason why she was successful in her interviews. Out of her offers, she picked the law firm where it seemed like people had more longevity, and ended up loving the people and the practice, eventually being promoted to the partnership there.

Nelia enjoyed practicing as a litigator. As a part of a mid-sized firm, she got a lot of experience quickly. In her first year, she went to court hearings by herself, defended and took depositions, and worked with partners and mentors who trusted her, believed in her, and appreciated her hard work. She also had the unique experience of handling appeals for cases that she tried. One case that she first-chaired ended up being appealed, and she got to present oral arguments on appeal, also, giving her the chance to see the whole life cycle of that case. With many firms focusing on specializing in certain areas of litigation, she had a unique generalist practice that was half-and-half plaintiff and defense work, with cases ranging from animal law to trade secret misappropriation and pharmaceuticals. After becoming partner at the firm, she had the chance to teach legal research, writing, and appellate advocacy as a visitor at Texas. Having had solid mentors throughout her practice, and having mentored young associates herself, she thought teaching would be a natural fit. She was right, and what started as a one-year visit became a full-time position. Her firm let her transition to an of-counsel position, and she is still connected with the firm. “Serving on committees is now fun!” Nelia said, and just as she’s appreciated staying involved with the firm, the people at the firm have also appreciated her continued connection with the firm.

Like many of the other communities she’s been a part of, she loves being a part of the faculty at Texas because of the people. “They put so much into what they do,” she said. Besides her colleagues, one of the other things Nelia loves about teaching is mentoring and helping students however she can. Just as she liked helping clients solve legal problems, she also likes helping students navigate the challenges of law school. She does this in her teaching and in her contributions to the Thurgood Marshall Legal Society, Texas’s affiliate of the National Black Law Students Association. She shares her lived experiences, and her sense of optimism that, like her, they can also succeed and thrive in law school and beyond.

Nelia has found her place as an integral part of several different communities for many years now. She’s been with the firm for 13 years, and she now serves as chair of the board of directors for the non-profit where she first started as a volunteer 20 years ago. She has also returned to her law school to teach. Just a year ago, the Austin Bar Foundation recognized Nelia for her work with the 2020 Joseph C. Parker Diversity Award. For her, it’s nice to be acknowledged, not because she’s ever had any sort of agenda, but because she’s done “the right thing.”

You can contact Nelia at nrobbi@law.utexas.edu and visit her faculty page at law.utexas.edu/faculty/nelia-j-robbi/.



Nelia Wins



LWI Lives Selection Process

The LWI Lives Committee is organized into three teams, and each team is responsible for selecting, proposing, and writing the three profiles in each issue. To ensure a diverse newsletter, teams propose individual names to the Co-Chairs, and the Co-Chairs review the suggestions to ensure a wide range of coverage over time.

If you have someone in mind who we should put on the list for a future newsletter, please feel free to email any of the committee members listed below. If you could include a note explaining why you think the individual's profile would be particularly interesting, it will help us in developing priorities.

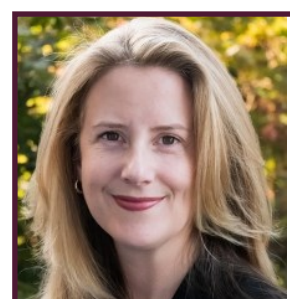
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