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The Law Place – Law School Scholarship
“Who is your legal hero, living or dead?”

As a child, I often had the most scattered, and perhaps impractical, dreams and aspirations for the direction I wanted my life to go. Sometimes, I wanted to be like Derek Morgan, an FBI agent from Criminal Minds. Other times, I wanted to be like Dr. Maggie Pierce, a cardiothoracic surgeon from Grey’s Anatomy. I even considered following in the footsteps of my father, a powerful preacher who moved and spoke with eloquence in the pulpit. I was all over the place until high school, when someone sat me down, calmed my wandering mind, and helped me figure out what truly made me tick. Since then, I have realized that our destinies operate like clockwork.

At the start of my sophomore year, I was shoved into an Introduction to Law course: “Law I.” I honestly had no intention of pursuing a legal education, so I assumed the class was simply assigned to satisfy the high school credit requirements for graduation—that is, until a young man, no older than 33, walked into the room and greeted the class with a smile. Then, as if his smile were a ruse, he aggressively began to call on students, instructing them to recite the Bill of Rights. Like everyone else, I initially froze when he called on me, but, unlike my classmates, my hesitation did not last long. Prior courses had taught me at least some of the first ten constitutional amendments. He smiled and continued down the line. After our grueling first pop quiz, he introduced himself as Charlie McCullum from Yazoo City, Mississippi, and I knew I had found my tick.

Mr. McCullum was unsuccessful in his own pursuit of law, but he worked his hardest to ensure he would train some of the greatest lawyers of this generation. His “Law I” and “Law II” classes focused on legal terminology and case analysis. With the U.S. Constitution as the face of a clock with its hands spun backward, we traveled from one historical courtroom to the next. Mr.

McCullum instructed us on the gray area of our legal system, where passion and reason converge between the lines of black-letter law. With my mind at ease for what felt like the first time, I became a sponge, soaking in everything I could about how our judiciary worked. We journeyed through history, watching the country adopt new legal doctrines. We observed the U.S. Supreme Court as it adapted to a changing world. Through those courses, I learned the limitations of the highest court in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the complexity of courtroom race relations in trials like *People v. O.J. Simpson*.

Those who kept up were allowed to continue our pre-legal studies with Mr. McCullum's 11th-grade course, "Court Systems." Building upon what we had learned the prior year, Mr. McCullum trained us to become true courtroom advocates. We learned evidence to sway juries to our side in trial simulations. We learned written and oral advocacy to prevent the miscarriage of justice and argue before the U.S. Supreme Court in appellate simulations.

At the start of my senior year, after having had Mr. McCullum as a teacher and mentor who watched me and my abilities grow, he invited me to join his Attorneys In the Making (A.I.M.) mock trial team, which competed through the YMCA's Texas Youth & Government program. By this point in my high school career, I knew I had a calling towards the legal profession, but while I had participated in other criminal justice clubs, I yearned for an experience that truly played to my newfound passion. After completing a rigorous tryout for A.I.M., I was immediately assigned as lead counsel and unanimously elected to serve as Vice-President, despite the team having numerous veterans.

Through A.I.M., I expanded my fundamental knowledge of trial advocacy, from the Rules of Evidence to the art of delivering a closing argument. That foundation brought me to Dillard University, where I was again invited to join a mock trial team. This time, it was the

nationally recognized Dillard University Mock Trial team. Competing with Dillard through the American Mock Trial Association (AMTA) allowed me to peek behind the veil to preview the “real” inner workings of the American courtroom that Mr. McCullum told us about, complete with implicit biases and subjectivity. Pursuing law felt like another scattered dream until I remembered one of my favorite lessons from Mr. McCullum: “Law practice is just that: practice. It means trial and error. It means change.” In my time with the team, I was blessed to lead it to many victories in “trial by combat,” most notably when it became the first team from the state of Louisiana to compete at the AMTA National Championship Tournament.

Charlie McCullum has undoubtedly shifted the course of my career and been a significant motivator in my pursuit of a juris doctor. He taught me that the courtroom is where I feel most comfortable. My breath deepens just before I open my mouth to argue the evidence. My body relaxes as I stand before the jury, preparing to passionately litigate matters on behalf of the disenfranchised. Now, having experienced the thrill of winning trials and the disenchantment of losing trials, I understand why Mr. McCullum sat me down in high school. Unbeknownst to me, I would spend the next 4 years training for law school and beyond. Because of him, I understand now that my nomadic mind has a more permanent home in our courts, and like the hands of the clock that tick down to the time I have my law license, advocacy is what truly makes me tick. To that end, Mr. McCullum is my legal hero because my decision to pursue law feels more like destiny than just another impractical aspiration.