



We Are Family

The Minority Student Program at Rutgers Law School celebrates 50 years of promoting underrepresented students for careers in the legal profession.

On a mid-April evening in Newark this year, the ballroom at the Robert Treat Hotel was quickly filling with men and women dressed in formal wear as they arrived to the sound of glasses clinking and the din of excited conversation. After all, it was a night that was 50 years in the making. Roughly 700 people—attorneys, judges, politicians, professors, and deans—were coming together to recognize the 50th anniversary of a pioneering program at Rutgers Law School that has diversified the New Jersey State Bar. The Minority Student Program (MSP) is a nationally acclaimed postadmissions program that serves students, regardless of race or ethnicity, who are underrepresented in the legal profession and who have faced discrimination or overcome social and economic hardships. The program offers legal-skills development, academic support, alumni mentoring and networking, internships, and other opportunities.

The program got its start during the civil rights movement, rising from the ashes of the civil unrest in Newark in 1967, when the simmering tensions led

students to demand diversity at Rutgers University–Newark and its law school. That year, of the 2,500 students attending Rutgers–Newark, a paltry 62 were African American, according to retired Rutgers Law School professor Paul Tractenberg, the author of *A Centennial History of Rutgers Law School in Newark: Opening a Thousand Doors* (The History Press, 2010). Between 1960 and 1967, only 12 nonwhite students graduated from the law school, and in 1969, there were fewer than 60 African-American attorneys among the 8,000 lawyers practicing in the state.

To address this imbalance, law school dean Willard Heckel enlisted a group of professors and students to sit on the committee convened to establish the MSP. Among the participants was Frank Askin, who retired in 2016 after a 50-year career on the faculty and earlier had been a civil rights organizer in his hometown of Baltimore. Under his leadership, the committee spent two years creating a broader admissions-evaluation system, which took into consideration a student's leadership ability, professional experience, and community involvement in addition to LSAT scores and grades. Originally, it was a quota program, but was later modified to comply with U.S. Supreme Court rulings.

Ronald K. Chen

Distinguished Professor of Law, Rutgers Law School



After graduating from Phillips Exeter Academy and Dartmouth College—"very admirable, but very traditional, educational institutions"—Ronald K. Chen arrived in Newark in 1980 to attend law school at Rutgers and had his eyes opened wide to possibility. His classmates, representing such diverse backgrounds and experiences, were just as much his teachers as were members of the faculty. Initially, he thought the MSP was just a support program but came to see it was much more than that. "It provides a vision of the law as an instrument of positive social change," says Chen NLAW'83.

The example set by the MSP propelled Chen along an illustrious legal career path: former New Jersey Public Advocate; current general counsel of the

American Civil Liberties Union and chair of the New Jersey Supreme Court Advisory Committee on Professional Ethics; and inaugural co-dean of Rutgers Law School, from which he recently stepped down to return to the law school's faculty. In litigating civil rights and civil liberties cases, Chen has been a legal warrior for voters' rights, among other causes.

The MSP's promotion of diversity in the classroom and inclusiveness in the legal profession taught Chen the value of passionate advocacy. "Rutgers' greatest gift was to empower me to make a difference—to promote social justice and give voice to the voiceless," says Chen.

Tamara J. Britt

General Counsel, Manhattan College

Tamara J. Britt was reluctant to apply to the MSP. She was in her 30s, had a graduate degree, would be a second-generation attorney, and was excelling in "majority" environments. Britt NLAW'09 was advised that the MSP was one big supportive family and that she might need it. The pressures of job, family, and attending law school at night quickly tanked her first-semester grades. Feeling defeated, Britt was encouraged by her advisers not to give up. "That's the MSP: people who lifted you up when you were down." She began to excel.

Britt saw, too, that the MSP was about more than just law school; it was about helping members of the community. As her career developed, Britt took the MSP creed with her: as director of development at the Rutgers University Foundation, as an associate at Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton, as an attorney in the Office of General Counsel at Rutgers, and today as general counsel at Manhattan College. In the law firm environment, she always tried to recreate the essence of the MSP. "Making it to a Wall Street law firm means you have what it takes," she says, "but sometimes having what it takes is not enough to survive and thrive."

She is still an envoy for the MSP. "You want to be successful for the MSP," she says, "and for the people who came before you and the people who will come after you. 'Look, this can be done.'"



"It worked out really well," says Askin. "It was really the first [program of its kind] in the country."

From its first class of 23 African-American students in 1968, the MSP has grown to include historically underrepresented students regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic background. More than 2,500 students have graduated from the MSP, including United States Senator Robert Menendez NLAW'79; New Jersey State Senator Nia Gill NLAW'75; New Jersey Assemblywoman Annette Quijano CCAS'88, NLAW'91; Passaic County prosecutor Camelia Valdes NLAW'96; and Hudson County prosecutor Esther Suarez DC'92, NLAW'97.

A daylong symposium that complemented the April 14th evening anniversary celebration featured remarks from former MSP deans, current professors, students, and alumni, including Menendez. "One of the things that you got through the MSP [was to know] how everybody came through some sort of struggle and had the desire to create change—whether that was change to the law, using the law as a tool of social justice, economic change, or change to the political process," he said.

Felicia Romain, who will graduate in 2019, says the MSP experience has been rewarding. "As someone who did not have any family members who were lawyers," she says, "I was extremely nervous and overwhelmed with the idea of being in law school. However, with the MSP, I had readily available resources that I knew I could rely on."

Jennifer Velez spent her childhood in a trailer park in Moonachie, New Jersey, and became the longest-serving commissioner of the state's Department of Human Services, holding the position for eight years. "I didn't have role models who were lawyers, and I was intimidated by the prospect of attending law school," says Velez, the daughter of an Ecuadorian immigrant and the first in her family to attend college. "I wanted a supportive environment, and that's exactly what the MSP offered."

In 2015, the School of Law–Newark and the School of Law–Camden merged to form Rutgers Law School; the MSP was introduced at the Camden location the following year. Program director Rhasheda Douglas says 70 students from underrepresented groups and disadvantaged backgrounds are taking part in Camden's MSP and 12 will graduate in 2019; 200 students are participating in the program at the Newark location. Through Camden's MSP, Rutgers Law School hosted a prelaw diversity conference in January 2018, created the MSP Summer Judicial Internship Program, and, working with the Philadelphia Diversity Law Group, placed seven students who served as summer associates at Philadelphia-area law firms and corporations.

"Newark's MSP has provided outstanding leadership in diversifying the legal profession for over 50 years," says Douglas, "and I am inspired by its history, and I hope to repeat its success in Camden."

The impact of the MSP is even more significant because Rutgers Law School is one of the 10 largest public law schools in the nation, with more than 1,100 students. With that kind of wind in the program's sails, alumni at the festive gala weren't just looking back but also to the future. Jeffrey Hsi NLAW'97, an expert in intellectual property and patent law who is a shareholder at Wolf, Greenfield & Sacks in Boston, recently pledged \$250,000 to the MSP and challenged law alumni and students to join him in offering financial help to first-year MSP students serving in summer public-service internships.

"The misconceptions are that there's not a need for diverse lawyers," he says, believing there is still a need to diversify the profession. Although the impact of the MSP over half a century has been "truly spectacular," Hsi says he'd like the program to continue to grow, deepening the impact its students are having on the legal profession and the communities they serve. • —Elizabeth Moore

Esther Salas

United States District Judge, District of New Jersey



Family means a lot to judge Esther Salas, including the one she found at the MSP. Shortly after enrolling in law school at Rutgers, the first in her family to pursue a legal degree, Salas RC'91, NLAW'94 feared she wasn't up to the challenge. But dean Janice Robinson allayed her fears, saying all the right things. "If you said then that I would become the first Latina United States District Judge in New Jersey, I wouldn't have believed it," says Salas.

After serving as an associate at Garces, Grabler & LeBrocq, she became an assistant federal public defender and then, in 2006, the first Hispanic magistrate judge for the United States District Court in New Jersey. Nominated

by President Barack Obama, Salas was confirmed as the United States District Judge for the District of New Jersey in 2011.

"From the professors to the administrators to your classmates," Salas says, "there was a critical sense that, together, anything is possible through the MSP. I never felt alone. I always felt accepted for who I was and who I wanted to be."

Every year, a new MPS class visits Salas. The students watch court proceedings and discuss with her expectations for law school. "We owe the MSP," says Salas, pointing out that for first-generation law students, it gives them a fighting chance. "You just don't get where you are and forget to leave the door open."

Wade Henderson

Retired President and CEO, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights

When Rutgers legal legend Arthur Kinoy argued a case on behalf of Adam Clayton Powell before the United States Supreme Court in 1969 and emerged on the court steps with two African-American lawyers by his side, Wade Henderson, a Howard University undergrad observing the proceedings, knew then that he wanted to be an attorney. Henderson NLAW'73 entered law school at Rutgers two years later and came to embody the mission of the MSP. For more than 20 years, he was the president and CEO of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.

After graduating, Henderson became the law school's first assistant dean and the director of the MSP. He continued his activism in positions at the American Bar Association, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. "Rutgers gave me the tools for understanding how to use the law creatively for change," says Henderson, who laments that problems that brought him to Rutgers in 1970 have not been entirely solved or have reemerged. "Victories are rarely permanent, and we need to advocate for enduring values."

