

# The Tom Vaughn Memorial Internship Program



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**T**his year the NACTT's Inclusion and Acceptance Committee launched the Tom Vaughn Memorial Internship Program. The Program, named in honor of Tom Vaughn, one of the founding members of the Committee, is designed to encourage students, from high school through law school, to experience work in the bankruptcy field by working in trustee offices. It is our hope that this program will help to not only create more diversity and inclusion within the bankruptcy bar, but also a greater understanding of the diverse individuals and groups involved in Chapter 13 bankruptcies.

The success of the internship program will depend on the support of Chapter 13 trustees. Prior to his passing, our fellow trustee, Robert Thomas, with the assistance of his interns, developed a step-by-step guide on how to set up an internship program in our offices. The Handbook is found on the NACTT's website under the "Resources" tab and provides excellent guidance. This article and the Handbook suggest several strategies that will create positive experiences for the interns and our offices.

In 2020 The American Bar Association analyzed diversity in the legal field and determined there was much work yet to be done. They concluded that:

the number of female lawyers in the United States has increased only 6%, from 31% to 37% between 2010 and 2020; in 2010, 89% of all lawyers were non-Hispanic whites, decreasing by only 3% 10 years later; in 2010, only 5% of all lawyers were African American despite comprising 13.4% of the U.S. population; four of five judges in 2020 were white and the percentage of African American judges actually dropped from 10.8% in 2016 to 9.8% in 2020.

For the diversity of the national bankruptcy bar to improve, it is important for lawyers in training and students who might be considering law as a career

to experience what bankruptcy practice is like. By recruiting students from a diverse array of schools, the Program can support a broader range of students exposed to this area of practice and ultimately work to increase the diversity of the bar and ultimately the bankruptcy bench, over time. In this way the internship program can provide a framework for attracting and keeping diversity in our office staff and profession.

In addition to the diversity discussion, the Report presents a very thorough statistical look at "Legal Deserts" with a county-by-county breakout of the number of attorneys in each state. According to the Report, "... large swaths of the United States have few lawyers or no lawyers. There are more than 3,100 counties and county equivalents in the U.S., and 54 of them have no lawyers. Another 182 have only one or two lawyers. Many are parts of legal deserts – large areas where residents have to travel far to find a lawyer for routine matters like drawing up a will, handling a divorce or disputing a traffic violation."<sup>11</sup> An analysis of these statistics will hopefully help to change the mindset of those who still see diversity as threatening their opportunities but will instead see an abundance of opportunities yet to be met. As trustees we have the chance to utilize this internship program as a means to both improve diversity in the legal profession and to become more culturally competent in the services we provide to debtors and other stakeholders.

In addition to providing opportunities to increase diversity, student interns can provide valuable support to trustee's and their staffs. Trustees who have worked with interns have found the experience to be personally rewarding as well as beneficial to the work of the office. Diversity and inclusion also have many tangible and well-documented benefits to an office. For example, the Lomax Study of 17 leading companies show that "more diverse companies are better able to attract top talent, and improve customer orientation, employee satisfaction, and decision-making."<sup>12</sup> They also show statistically

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consistent correlation between a company's strategic implementation of diversity and inclusion and an increase in profit and market differentiation. Thus, an internship program designed to promote diversity and inclusion will provide many positive possibilities.

Preparing staff to receive the internship program is also an important consideration. Most of the intern's interactions will be with staff who will have significant influence on their experiences. All staff should therefore understand that the program and the interns are important to the trustee. Trustees who take on interns should be prepared to spend constructive time with them, take an active role in reviewing evaluation results and, based on those results, make adjustments to the internship for greater effectiveness. This level of involvement will indicate to staff that the program also deserves their support.

It is important to assign interns work that is meaningful. As discussed in the internship manual, interns want to make meaningful contributions to your office. You want to keep in mind the intern's status as a student. However, busy work, unimportant and low-level assignments indicate a lack of value for the internship and the intern. Provide the intern's supervisor with several options for assignments and make a part of your interactions with the intern updates on this work and its importance to the office.

The success of the program also depends on the sufficient allocation of resources, especially financial and personnel resources. Your budget should include support for educational activities that recognize the intern's status as a student and the internship as a part of that individual's formal learning experience. These allocations do not need to be large amounts; however, including them in the budget makes the internship a planned and operational part of your office. Through the Inclusion and Acceptance Committee, the NACTT has budgeted funds to assist offices that may not have funds sufficient to provide a stipend or wages for an intern. David Peake as

coordinator of the Program can assist trustees in exploring options for this assistance.

Interactions with your office staff is an important part of the internship. This exposure not only provides a broad overview of the bankruptcy process and office administration, but also it can serve as a basis for interactions that lead to truly meaningful relationships. Too often diversity and inclusion efforts fail or become problematic because they lack genuine relationships that allow people to relax their fears about others. Instead, we need an understanding of diversity and inclusion that goes beyond numbers to include greater sensitivity to and awareness of others. This level of understanding seldom occurs outside of personal and professional relationships. Getting to know each other in meaningful ways is a first step toward achieving the mutual trust and respect that diversity and inclusion require.

The Inclusion and Acceptance Committee hopes the Tom Vaughn Memorial Internship Program will go a long way in helping to bring about greater acceptance, inclusion and diversity in the bankruptcy field. To that end, it is important that we approach the program as a resource for gaining new perspectives that enrich our business practices and our professional culture. To be effective, diversity and inclusion require the efforts and buy-in from everyone involved. Most importantly, they require the willingness for us to move beyond static positions to those that allow for greater engagement and fair consideration of others. 🏠

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> American Bar Association (2020). "ABA Profile of the Legal Profession 2020, July, 2020." <https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/news/2020/07/potlp2020.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Lomax, A., Ojo, Michael, Rodney, L., & Simon, C. (2019) "The Value of Diversity & Inclusion." The Jabian Journal. <https://journal.jabian.com/the-value-of-diversity-and-inclusion/>.

# An Interview with Justin Jackson, Thomas Vaughn Intern



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Chapter 13 and  
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District of Vermont



**Pam Simmons-Beasley**  
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Justin Jackson is a current 3rd year law student from Thurgood Marshall School of Law. Before law school, Mr. Jackson received his Bachelor of Science in Sociology from the University of North Texas. He is also a member of Kappa Alpha Psi. Fraternity Inc. Justin is a native of Dallas, Texas. He is a graduate of Woodrow Wilson High School. As a product of Dallas Independent School District, it is Mr. Jackson's mission to pour into the youth of the community that help shape him. After law school, Mr. Jackson plans to practice criminal and civil law, as well as start a nonprofit for youth in underserved communities.

David Peake, Chapter 13 Trustee from Houston, Texas was the first trustee to embrace the opportunity to mentor an intern as part of the newly created Thomas Vaughn Memorial Internship Program. Justin Jackson, a third-year law student from Thurgood Marshall School of Law, has been assisting in David's office since June 21, 2021. The authors' discussions with David about how the program's first intern was doing would include glowing reports about a bright, enthusiastic, and very capable new intern. To start to get to know Justin and get a sense of how his internship was going, we set up a zoom meeting to talk to Justin ourselves. That meeting confirmed that David's enthusiasm about his intern was well founded. We too were impressed by this intern and what follows are excerpts of our chat with him about his background and the journey that brought him to a Chapter 13 office.

## 1. Where did you grow up Justin?

I grew up in Dallas, Texas, right down the street from Kimball high school in the Oak Cliff area.

## 2. What was your life like growing up?

Life for me growing up was really good. I didn't grow up monetarily rich, but I grew up rich in love. I've always had a great support system around me. There is an African proverb that reads "it takes a village to raise

a child." I definitely had a great village. My mom was super involved when I was growing up. She made sure that I had any and every resource, even if that meant she went without. My grandparents were great and loved me abundantly. My dad is literally like my twin. I started living with him in high school, and I think that it was very vital in my success today. He really taught me what it was to be a man, at a time where you are really trying to figure out what that looks like. Lastly, my god moms are all amazing. They are all like 2nd mothers to me. This answer was long winded, but I wanted to make sure I thoroughly expressed my gratitude. My foundation was paramount to my success.

## 3. What were you like as a student?

My whole life I have had a thirst for knowledge. School has always come natural to me. I remember always finishing the standardized tests as a kid hours before everyone else and always getting exemplary on all the sections. I'm not exactly sure where this desire for knowledge came from. My mom always pushed me to be a great student. Looking back, I used to get upset but I truly don't believe I would be here if it wasn't for her. As a law student, I have been very driven and dedicated to achieving my end goal which is graduating and ultimately passing the bar. I have a relentless work ethic, and I think it serves me in and out of the classroom.

#### 4. When did you first consider Law School?

I first considered Law School my senior year of undergrad. I was a sociology major and seeing the inequities in our society on a macro level really disturbed me. I knew that I wanted to be a part of the change I wanted to see. I decided that the legal realm was the avenue I was going to take to do such. I also wanted to be in a line of work that challenged me mentally, as well as something that properly compensated me for my expertise. Towards my latter years of college, I started to find myself, and I felt that law was a culmination of everything that I wanted out of a profession.

#### 5. Was there anyone in your life that influenced your decision to pursue law?

I would have to say it's a mixture of several people that influenced my decision to come to law school. One is someone close to me and the other two are historical figures. The first person that influenced my decision is my grandmother, Mary Lee Flewellen. My grandmother is the definition of a phenomenal woman. She grew up in Winnsboro, Louisiana and was one of 12 children. My grandmother grew up in a time where sharecropping was still very commonplace. It's hard for me to really fathom, but my granny picked cotton growing up. For a person to go from that to a business owner (a business that recently celebrated its 50th anniversary) is nothing short of amazing. Her work ethic and caring heart helped mold me as a child. The bond we shared is one that I can't really put into words. My grandmother passed June of 2019 and my mom was really skeptical about me coming to law school with her recent passing, but I knew that it was what my granny would have wanted. The two historical figures that inspired me are Malcolm X and Thurgood Marshall. Malcolm X is someone that fought for equity and justice relentlessly. His willingness to put the greater good of his people over his own personal interest is something that I marvel at. I hope to inspire generations to come as he did. Thurgood Marshall is one of the brightest legal minds the world has ever seen. He was fearless and a true trailblazer. It's surreal that I attend Thurgood Marshall School of Law. I try to emulate him as much as possible.

#### 6. Has your law school experience been what you expected so far?

Coming into law school I didn't have any expectations of what law school would be. I understood that it would be difficult, but not to the extent that it is. I think it's something that you can't fully understand until you are immersed in it.

#### 7. What have been the high and low points of your law school experience?

Law school has definitely been filled with its ups and downs. If I had to pinpoint my lowest point, I would say it would be the end of my first semester of 1L year. I was completely worn out, I had no clue of how to navigate law school, and I wasn't really sure if this was the path God had for me. My highest point to date was making the dean's list for the first time the Spring semester of my 2L year. Going back to my low point, I really prayed about my situation, talked to my dad, and I felt that this was my calling. I decided that I just needed to focus in more and push through whatever adversity came my way. I did just that and to see the fruits of my labor come to harvest was an indescribable feeling. My story is one definitely of perseverance. Law school has been my biggest challenge to date, and I'm proud to say I am a semester away from successfully making it through this chapter.

#### 8. What kind of positions are you interested in pursuing after law school?

After law school I'm interested in practicing civil law. I have not exactly tailored my list on what specific position I would want (I.e., associate for a firm or general counsel for a company). I have also contemplated opening up my own practice fresh out of school.

#### 9. Why were you interested in this internship?

I was interested in this internship because of the challenge I knew it would present and the abundance of knowledge that I would gain. Bankruptcy is such an intricate practice area, and it encompasses other practice areas such as family and property law. I knew that if I could succeed in this environment, I could succeed anywhere. I wanted an internship that I felt would prepare me for life after law school.

#### 10. What skills and or knowledge have you gained from your internship?

During my time at the Trustee's office, I have gained a myriad of skills and an abundance of knowledge. Solely from a legal perspective, I have sharpened my legal drafting skills as well as my legal research skills. In terms of skills that are transferable to almost any setting, I have really honed my critical thinking and crisis management skills. As far as knowledge, I have really gained a detailed knowledge of the bankruptcy process and its innerworkings. Working in the Trustee's office has given me a look at what a bankruptcy case looks like for a creditor's attorney, a debtor's attorney, and for the trustee.

#### 11. As a result of your internship, would you be more likely to consider bankruptcy as a practice area? Why?

I definitely would be interested in bankruptcy as practice area as a result of this internship. I love the

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challenge that bankruptcy provides, and I really enjoy the spontaneity. I get bored with mundane tasks and bankruptcy is far from it. Also, I think bankruptcy is an area where you can be a public servant, and I'm all about helping people.

**12. What advice would you give a potential intern considering bankruptcy?**

My advice would be to strongly consider taking the position if it is offered. I would be upfront and honest and let them know that bankruptcy is a very demanding practice area. I would let them know that if working in a field that will challenge you but also provide you with an abundance of knowledge is something that you are interested in, then this is the practice area for you.

**13. If you could make a change to your internship, what would it be?**

Honestly, I wouldn't change anything. I'm grateful for the highs and the lows. I think my journey is unique and I needed this experience for my professional development.

**14. What do you believe the next step is in your career, and how can we help you get there?**

I believe the next step for me is first passing the bar, but after that I feel limitless. I'm not necessarily sure what my next step will be, but I know that my steps

are guided. I truly believe God has a purpose for me, and law is one of the many ways that he will use me. I think you guys can help me by continuing to show support and imparting any wisdom that you may have. Also, by connecting me with people who want to see young black attorneys succeed and are willing to help in any capacity.

Toward the end of our interview with Justin he mentioned that after getting to know the various departments in David's office, he was drawn to the Mortgage Department. He mentioned that the challenging work in that department- dealing with escrows and the myriad issues that arise as a result of tracking mortgages through the Chapter 13 process really engaged him. What was clear to the authors by the end of the interview is that Justin is someone who thrives on challenge. He is clearly someone who is excited about the prospect of serving others and sees using his skills and knowledge in that pursuit as his mission in life. With an attitude like that and with his energy and drive, we expect we will be seeing more of Justin in the bankruptcy world, whatever career path he chooses.

It was truly a pleasure to get to see and talk with Justin and we know that with him as a prototype intern, the Program is off to an excellent start. 🏠

Mark your calendars now and plan to join us in beautiful San Francisco for the NACTT 2022 Annual Seminar.



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