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Simone Says...

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First-year law student and Black Business and Professional Association scholarship recipient Simone Samuels speaks from personal experience about the importance of access to education and to the legal system.

By Victoria Leenders-Cheng

Simone Samuels' smile is contagious.

It spreads across her face in greeting, widens as she discusses the endeavours she is planning as the head of the Black Law Students' Association at McGill and blossoms to its full glow when she recalls the day she found out she won the Black Business and Professional Association (BBPA) national scholarship.

"I was in the Gelber library checking my e-mail when I was supposed to be studying," she says, grinning. "I saw an e-mail from the BBPA saying that I had won the scholarship [which is sponsored by national law firm Fraser Milner Casgrain LLP]. That made my day!"

"It's a \$5,000 renewable scholarship, which is very helpful. It was a very pleasant surprise in dreary October."

Samuels, who is in her first year at the Faculty of Law, has wanted to be a lawyer since she was eight years old. The oldest of three children, she witnessed the effects of legal



battles first-hand as her mother was wrongfully dismissed from her workplace and her father negotiated closely with his union after he was laid off during the economic crisis.

“My siblings and I, we don’t come from a rich family, we’re middle class and seeing how the middle class is too rich to afford legal aid but too poor to afford a lawyer made me want to be a lawyer even more. It wasn’t just about the legal battles; there was also a thing about access to justice.”

She and her sister would often help their parents look up background information for their cases, Samuels says. “We ended up almost as their legal investigators. That’s what got my sister and I really interested in law.”

Samuels’ interest in access to justice extends to her work as the president of the Black Law Students’ Association at McGill. The group is hoping to start a critical race theory course, organize events for Black History month in February and set up an alumni cocktail that would also serve as a mentorship opportunity.

“What we find is that we have so many alumni, we probably have a lot of black alumni but we don’t know where they are, we don’t know what they’re doing,” she says. A networking event such as an alumni cocktail could also serve as a chance for students to “connect with people who have gone through what we’ve gone through and who are doing amazing things, in different career avenues.”

And if that doesn’t keep her busy enough, she says, smiling sheepishly, her ultimate goal is to start a scholarship for minority students.

“I’m a scholarship recipient myself,” she explains, citing the adage, “To whom much is given, much is required.”

“I hate hearing stories of people who don’t apply to law school because the money isn’t there. My parents didn’t have money to send me to undergrad or law school so I did both on scholarships and I know how important scholarships can be.”

The McGill BLSA will be hosting a cocktail event for students and alumni in February (Toronto) and March (Montreal). Please contact blsa.law@mail.mcgill.ca or visit <http://blsam.mcgill.ca> for further details and to add your name to the alumni database/directory.

Photo credit: Lysanne Larose

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