

# Yveka Pierre

## Generation "Y" Law Student Straddles Two Cultures

By Writer Shar-Lee Davis

*The U.S. is known to be both ethnically and culturally diverse, but there is still much remaining to be done to ensure societal progression through social integration. This is especially true where poverty results from a lack of social equality, and the law fails to carry out its mandate in a timely and diligent manner.*



Yveka Pierre

Yveka Pierre moved to the U.S. from Haiti when she was seven years old. She struggled with having to “straddle two cultures” when she started school in Fort Lauderdale/Miami, Florida. For her, the multi-cultural environment in Miami had her interacting with families that were similar to hers, but school was a place where she found that not many shared her experiences. This was a fact that intensified the struggle to define herself as Haitian and/or American, and what it meant to be a Haitian-American.

Pierre tells DyNAMC that her decision to study law was motivated, firstly, by an experience she had at the age of eight, just a year after moving to the U.S. She describes witnessing her first American arrest as scary, and realized that the community indifference to the event was a sign of how “normative the abnormal was” in her community. Later, exposure to the science of criminology following the arrest of a friend, further impacted her views on criminal justice leading to the realization that she could use it to bring awareness to her community. Her first year in law school was a period of “mental adjustment,” where her thought process had to change to be more detail oriented and objective. For her, the mental change was a bit challenging, but it became a way of life while she worked over 900 pro bono hours with the HIV/AIDS and Criminal Law clinics at the David A. Clarke School of Law.

Public benefits work in the District of Columbia was the next rung on the ladder for her, particularly in working on appealing those decisions made against beneficiaries of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits program. The TANF program provides temporary financial assistance for families with more than one dependent, as well as pregnant women.

Pierre explains to DyNAMC that the problem with this program is that, after the provisional sixty months of assistance, very few people have actually overcome employment barriers. She states that for many there is low job availability due to their backgrounds, lack of access to proper child care facilities, transportation, and a myriad of other underlying issues, which the program directors do not take into consideration before cutting benefits.

A link can be seen between these situations and the poverty line in the District of Columbia. Poverty is, by far, the most dominant social issue in DC, and Pierre admits that a person’s socio-economic status has direct relation to their race. She indicates that if you were to take a look at the income map of DC, the income in the Northwest is higher by several thousands of dollars than the income in the Southeast which has a predominantly black community. Citing that politicians are often blind to this reality, they would seek to offset the obvious lack of infrastructure by providing housing. The question that many fail to ask is whether or not this housing is close to the resources necessary to have a quality life.



Alongside those initiatives Pierre tells DyNAMC that raising the minimum wage is the first step to solving the issue of poverty, as it would provide economic equality and progressive social change.

In her native Haiti, poverty is also a crippling problem. For years, Haitians moved to the other half of the island they share with Dominican Republic in search of better opportunities, but are constantly met with violence and racial discrimination. In 2013, the Dominican Republic decided to strip Haitians and their descendants born in Haiti of their citizenship, further compounding the issue. Pierre states that, although Haitians are a strong people who will inevitably make their way out of current despair, it is the narrative of the country that tears it down. She points out that the Dominican Republic is more internationally favored as a vacation spot, while “Haiti’s relationship with the international community has been one sown with grievances.” In addition to the blatant racial difference of the two countries, Haiti inadvertently gets the shorter end of the stick.

While repealing the inhumane law the Dominican Republic passed in 2013 would provide Haitians with more security, Pierre admits this would not solve the underlying issues plaguing the two nations. “The Civil Rights Act of 1964 did not eradicate racism in the U.S.,” she tells DyNAMC. “With regards to Haiti and Dominica, a lot of it is blind hatred of what it means to be ‘other.’”

Pierre firmly believes that xenophobia will not be eradicated by simply introducing new policies, but says the way forward is through education and anti-xenophobic campaigns to foster cultural knowledge and integration. She believes these are some of the only ways to bridge the ‘race gap.’

Pierre reiterates that she loves what she does and hopes to use her future endeavors to help those who cannot legally help themselves. She speaks of a summer work experience in Baltimore, Maryland, with the Felony Division of the Office of the Public Defender, where she did a series of jail visits. It is here, she tells DyNAMC, that precarious legal situations struck very close to home. She met with individuals who had spent up to eighteen months in jail without ever having a court date. There were others who had willingly admitted to crimes they are adamant they did not commit, simply because they preferred being given a sentence and time to serve, rather than an indefinite wait. Due to the racial similarities, Pierre could identify with these victims of the law, and laments how “voiceless” many of them actually were. She hopes to be published in these areas of the law in the future, so as to help draw attention to the failures of the justice system.

Pierre tells DyNAMC she also hopes to study for her LL.M. in Intellectual Property Law, because she believes the ability to own your idea is empowering, and that minority groups will thrive once they are aware of this option. Pierre hopes that, through this line of study, she can “give a voice to the voiceless.”

To young and upcoming lawyers she says, “Think long and hard about why you want to go to law school, what you hope to accomplish, and if it is something you really want. If you are a member of a minority group, find someone who has done it before you and let them help you get on track. That support is important.”