

John McNeill

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When John McNeill (UK Law '82) was a fourth grade student in a poverty-stricken area of North Philadelphia in the 1960s, his teacher brought in a white female lawyer to talk to the class.

"She talked about problems that I would hear my father and his friends talk about when they would sit around just hanging out," said McNeill. "Things like 'I wish I had someone who could have read this lease before I signed it.' My dad was a hardworking man, but not an educated man. What she talked about was how lawyers could do all those little things my father and adults in my life had problem with."

That moment planted a seed that eventually took McNeill to Wyoming for college and then to the University of Kentucky College of Law. As a law student, McNeill was active in the Black Law Students Association (BSLA), at that time called BALSAs. In his second year, McNeill and five other fellow BALSAs students began a diversity workshop for historically disadvantaged students – including African-Americans, women and eastern Kentucky first generation college students – giving them information on how to study for and take the LSAT, what law school classes were like, and opening doors of opportunity. This was before the current KLEO Program ever existed.

"Dean Thomas Lewis and Carroll Stevens were extremely helpful to our small BALSAs organization," recalled McNeill. "The law school helped us a little with the financing. We contacted all the universities in the central, northern, and eastern parts of the state. Kids came in and we had an all-day program and it has continued ever since. That's something we're proud of starting."

After graduating and beginning his legal career – becoming the first African-American hired by a majority-owned Lexington, Kentucky law firm – McNeill continued being active with BALSAs both formally and informally. McNeill also helped revitalize the John Rowe Chapter of the National Bar Association. McNeill served as president of the John Rowe Chapter from 1990-1994 and 2000-2002.

McNeill has also been supportive of law school scholarships – perhaps foremost the Ollen B. Hinnant Scholarship for minority and historically disadvantaged law students. Hinnant was the first African-American graduate of UK Law. Though he was born and raised in Lexington, Hinnant spent his legal career practicing in New Jersey due to the lack of employment opportunities for African-American attorneys in Kentucky. Upon retirement, Hinnant returned to Lexington where he went out of his way to encourage McNeill and others – both practitioners and law students – as they navigated a profession that was more open to people of color than it had been when Hinnant graduated, but still had a long way to go.

"I've seen that progress," said McNeill. "We now have African-American judges like Denise Clayton, Pamela Goodwine, Gary Payne and Brian Edwards. We have young African-American lawyers who routinely graduate from law school and get hired by majority-owned firms, when that wasn't even on the radar when I was coming out of law school. When I was hired by Landrum & Shouse in 1985, I thought of myself as a shock troop hitting the shore, and everything I did would reflect on opportunities for generations of lawyers to come after me. Now that I'm in the twilight of my career, I'm trying to provide an example of how to handle being a seasoned lawyer. This is a noble profession and you have an obligation to do it right."