

An Interview with Michaela Bland, Esq.

by Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Esq., MLIS and Meghan L. Hopkins, Esq.

Focus on the Future is a new spotlight series where members of the *Rhode Island Bar Journal* Editorial Board interview attorneys who are newer to the Rhode Island Bar.

> **What is your current title and position?**

I am a Staff Attorney at the Rhode Island Center for Justice. I am also a Skadden Fellow, which is a project-based two-year fellowship in public interest law funded by the Skadden Fellowship Foundation. Through my Skadden Fellowship, I am working on a two-year public interest law project at the Rhode Island Center for Justice on education pipeline issues. I provide direct representation, community education, and legislative advocacy on issues relating to the school-to-prison pipeline. At the end of my fellowship, I hope to obtain a position as a federal court clerk.

> **What do you actually do all day?**

Every day I work on both big picture and small picture things related to defending students' right to an education free of discrimination. For example, most days I interact with or meet with members of community organizations like Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education (ARISE), the Providence Student Union (PSU), Youth in Action (YIA), the Rhode Island Urban Debate League (RIUDL) and Providence Youth Student Movement (PrYSM). I meet with these organizations to focus on on-going policy work. I also may work on an actual case where I am directly representing an aggrieved student or may attend meetings as a liaison. For example, I was a liaison for the state's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee. Additionally, I cover emergency needs at the Center. Recently, I represented someone at trial in housing court.

> **What do you like the most about your position?**

I love working with the community organizations. The work is all about giving life to the voice and vision of students. It is beautiful to listen to the ideas of the youth but then be able to use strategies I learned in law school to amplify their voices. Conversely, the biggest challenge is the "adults know best" attitude that many have. There are some who feel that students shouldn't have power and it is hard work trying to shift the power dynamic.

> **What is your best advice to those in power based on your work in this fellowship?**

Listen more to the younger voices around you. They are our future.

> **What is your best advice to other public interest attorneys?**

Persist! You will be challenged, ignored, and shut down. Dance in the discomfort. You will find allies and be able to build the community. Change happens slowly but that is okay. Persist anyway.

> **Who is your biggest role model in or out of the law?**

I am empowered every day by the fact that I am living my ancestors' wildest dreams.



MICHAELA BLAND, ESQ.

> **What do you do to de-stress?**

I never want to get to the point where the facts of a case don't affect me. I don't ever want to lose the connection with the clients and with justice. I view everything through a humanitarian lens and want to continue that. I volunteer as a member of the board of directors of New Urban Arts (an organization that positively impacts high school students, predominately those of color, through art) and I also take a weekly dance class. It is my sacred space I use to recharge and fill up my cup. I also have a great group of supportive friends who help put my pieces back together when I am stressed out.

> **What is your favorite restaurant in Rhode Island?**
Plant City in Providence.

> **Name one thing that you could not live without and why?**
Generally, music. Specifically, Spotify. I am always on Spotify!

> **How have you chosen to decorate your office?**

My office is very nature-themed. I have photos from different seasons with rustic overtones. I like to retain my connection to the outside world even while at work. I also have different posters in my office that reflect the great pioneers of social justice. It is very important to me that my office space remain authentic to who I am as a person and the social causes I believe in.



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