

An Interview with Monsurat Ottun, Esq.

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

Focus on the Future is a 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 an Assistant City Solicitor for the City of Providence.

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

My role is multi-faceted. Most recently, I have become primarily responsible for our cybersecurity initiatives, working on our information security, data privacy and risk management infrastructure, protocol and policies. I used to prosecute cases in the Providence District Court and still manage aspects of Municipal Court prosecution. I am also a civil litigator in Superior Court and work on the City's contracts as a part of our contracts team. Additionally, I get to work on and support some of the Mayor's initiatives such as his Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparations Executive Order as well as play a role in the African American Ambassadors Group, and more specifically the Police Advisory sub-group. No two days are alike for me. I attend many meetings and also do a lot of advising, as well as document review and editing. I advise the Board of Park Commissioners, the Providence Human Relations Commission, and the Committee on Urban Redevelopment, Renewal and Planning as well as lead our Vendor Management and newly formed Information Security Advisory Group. Ironically, I wanted to be a transactional attorney! I was initially hired to do work with the City's contracts but soon found myself taking on a whole lot more. Having been able to work on different aspects of legal work, I have come to appreciate and enjoy the different facets of everything I get to do.

> **Who is your biggest inspiration inside or outside of law?**

There have been several attorneys that have been supportive of my journey through law school and beyond. Specifically, Judge Thompson, Judge Savage, Attorney Tara Allen, Attorney Deborah Johnson, and Attorney Kathy Thompson. They have all supported me on my journey to becoming a lawyer and inspire me to work through the obstacles to achieve success. An inspiration is Judge Melissa Dubose, an African-American female judge who was the first judge I have appeared in front of in Providence District Court. She was also new to the bench but soon became a District Court favorite. She shows me that judges can be kind, patient, and relatable. That can be hard to find in our profession.

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

I have been thinking about self-care a lot lately. To de-stress I try to be active when I have the time. I go to the gym, hike, or go for a walk on the beach – really helps me clear my mind. I have also gone to paint nights (now I get to do it virtually ever since COVID), and I take a dance class and read interesting books.

> **What is the next goal you hope to accomplish in your career?**

I recently graduated last May with my Master's Degree in cybersecurity. I would love to be able to merge my work in cybersecurity with my work in



MONSURAT OTTUN, ESQ.

business and law in a strategic and meaningful way. To an extent, I get to do that now but with everything going on in the world, I would like to continue to explore how I can build an expertise that will significantly help in dealing with some of our social issues going forward. There is a lot happening with technology and advancements in the law. It's kind of exciting.

I also do some work with small businesses and nonprofits on strategic planning, growth, and development. I'd like to continue to be a support for local economic and community development in some way, shape, or form.

> **What is your favorite restaurant in Rhode Island?**

I don't have a favorite restaurant of all time but I do enjoy trying new places. I just tried the Rhody Hen, which is a quaint breakfast spot in my hometown, Pawtucket. I also recently tried a new spot on Armistice Blvd, which was pretty good. Any spot with good breakfast food, really good pasta or Nigerian food is a plus for me.

> **Name one thing that you could not live without and why?**

I cannot live without my planner. It keeps me organized and on top of my day. My planner is a comprehensive one that helps me to stay on top of my short- and long-term goals, my daily habits, and my day-to-day schedule. I'd be lost without it.

> **Name the most influential lawyer(s) in your career so far.**

There are three attorneys, who stick out to me right now, who have helped and mentored me in different ways, especially since I have only been practicing for about three years.

At the City of Providence, Noah Kilroy



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has been a great coach and friend. He has taught me a lot about litigation and really ushered me into the prosecutor role. Noah consistently encouraged me to overcome fears of failing or of messing up and instead to just fall or fail forward – take notes, learn the lessons, and do it better next time. Steve Nelson has been a great support and mentor, particularly when it comes to trial practice. I have never met anyone more patient or more thorough. He has often made me feel like I know more and can do more than I think I can.

Finally, Bridgette Louro, who was my supervisor at Rhode Island Legal Services, taught me to be confident in my own abilities as an attorney. She was my first supervisor in litigation practice and believed in my abilities as a litigator who was just starting out. Her support and coaching made me really feel like I could do it.

There are many others, too many to name. I'm grateful for the overall support and encouragement I've received as an attorney.

> What do you find the most meaningful in your work?

The most rewarding part of my job is that my work has a direct impact on my community at large. The office environment is very supportive and I have found that the work challenges me and pushes me outside my comfort zone. I have learned so much about law and about how government works in a few short years.

> How have you chosen to decorate your office?

My office has very good feng shui I would say. It has a calm feel to it, achieved through lamps and other personal inspirations. Most that walk into my office tend to like the feel or vibe it gives off. My favorite photos on my walls are one of Misty Copeland, an African American professional ballet dancer, and one of a sunset I took at Clearwater Beach in Florida. The combination of calm and inspirational are likely the themes of my office.

> You were recently named the Muslim-American Community Liaison for the City of Providence. What has your experiences been like as a Muslim-American attorney?

Being the Muslim-American Liaison has been rewarding for me. We're currently working on a City webpage dedicated to the education on, and resources for, our community. I would say that as a Black female Muslim lawyer, when I walk into a courtroom, people often make assumptions about me – oftentimes it is that I am not even an attorney, never mind credible or potentially good at what I do. Honestly, I can never tell if it's simply because I look young, or if it's something else. I recognize that I have a bigger burden to prove myself because of stigmas placed on me, however, I continue to just focus on what's in front of me and build on my skills as an attorney. I am grateful for the many surrounding judges, attorneys, and City employees that I work with that are supportive and forward-thinking/acting. I don't see my faith as a burden in my profession but rather as a blessing, allowing me to educate and create opportunities to build awareness around the community of people that share my beliefs. I have been able to positively affect law and policy in Providence and I continue to answer and address issues around race and religion with those that are interested in having those sometimes uncomfortable conversations.