

Trends

Law Students of the Year

Sherry Karabin

Ally Pruitt has a fierce determination to help those who need so much. This is just one of the reasons she leads a pool of worthy candidates who show that the future of the legal profession is in good hands.

It was a cold Super Bowl Sunday in 2015 when the call came in. Rockford, Ill., teenager Alexandra “Ally” Pruitt couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Jaylin Shaw, her close friend and basketball buddy since middle school, had been shot and killed.

Gun violence wasn’t unusual in the community, and Pruitt had lost friends before, but this time was different. Shaw was her champion, the one who supported and believed in her potential, always pushing her to “be better” and “do better.”



Ally Pruitt, a second-year at of UIC John Marshall Law School, is our Law School Student of the Year. »

Life had not been easy for Pruitt and her younger brother, A.J. Her father suffered from an autoimmune disorder that left him unable to work, and her mother had taken on the role of sole breadwinner for the family of four.

"I remember standing in the street in the area that had been turned into a memorial for him and being so distraught," she said of the days following Shaw's death. "I could still see some of the blood frozen into the ground."

Ever since, Pruitt has been on a mission to improve the lives of the less fortunate — something she believes her friend would have encouraged her to do if he were alive.

Now in her second year at UIC John Marshall Law School, Pruitt is our Law Student of the Year.

Many people have tough paths leading to law school. Hers has been particularly fraught. And yet she sees that as a positive, not a negative.

"I am very grateful for my life in Rockford because it gave me the passion to make changes in communities like the one in which I was raised," said Pruitt, who recently began her second semester in John Marshall's Pro Bono Litigation Clinic.

Rockford is a challenging community, no question. The Northern Illinois city has a stubbornly high crime rate. It was in this environment that Pruitt grew up. She said she attended more funerals than she could count on one hand and watched people she considered family disappear.

Pruitt did not disappear. She wanted to make something of herself and help others in the process.

After graduating from Rockford's Guilford High School, she enrolled in DePaul University in Chicago, where she took advantage of a program that allowed her to tutor at the Cook County Jail during her freshman year.

"It was an Inside-Out program, where students were brought in to learn alongside the inmates," she said. "I was paired up with another young woman, who was also 19, but she was charged with attempted murder."

At the time, Pruitt was a journalism major and had no plans to become an attorney. But that was about to change.

A firm believer in listening to other people's stories, Pruitt said she began imagining how this woman's life might have been different if only someone had been there to help her. The experience convinced her there was a need for institutional change, the kind a lawyer might be able to help effectuate.

She decided to tackle a second major: sociology, with a concentration in law, crime and criminology. But after completing her sophomore year, she was hit with a grim reality. She would not be able to afford four years of college.

"I knew if I took time off to pursue full time work that I might never go back," she said. "My dad

"I knew if I took time off to pursue full-time work that I might never go back, she said. My dad never graduated college, and I was determined to show my younger brother that college was possible."

She came up with a three-year plan that consisted of three jobs, including an internship at Cook County Jail, two online classes and an LSAT prep course.

The hard work paid off, and in April 2018 Pruitt received the news that she had been accepted to UIC John Marshall Law School.

During her first year, she clerked for Justice Carl Walker at the Illinois First District Appellate Court. There, she worked on cases ranging from criminal and bankruptcy to intellectual property matters.

She is currently a law clerk for the Homicide Task Force of the Cook County Public Defender's Office.

On her first day, she was assigned to assist in the case of a now-40-year-old man remanded from the Conviction Integrity Unit. The man, who ardently proclaimed his innocence, had been incarcerated for almost 20 years on murder charges.

"I spent about eight months working on his case," Pruitt said. "I had a great relationship with him, and despite his wrongful conviction, he had such a positive attitude.

In December 2019, her client was set free after Pruitt and assistant public defenders succeeded in getting the case nolle.

"I was so happy for him," she said. "I am so honored to have assisted this man. I will remember this case for the rest of my career."

In addition to her work on the Homicide Task Force, Pruitt is involved with habeas corpus matters, parole board hearings, adoptions and name changes. She also works on prisoners rights issues for LGBTQ+ inmates and has volunteered at the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center.

Now more than halfway through law school, Pruitt said she is still figuring out where she wants to make her mark after graduation. But one thing is certain.

"I would . . . like to start a scholarship fund that benefits people who were raised in communities similar to mine," she said. "I would not be here today if people had not believed in me, and I want to pay that hope forward."