

Audio Transcript, Stop 10: 2011-2020

All Speakers: Welcome!

Speaker 1: My name is Nick and I'm one of the founders of the Visibility Initiative. I graduated from Northwestern in 2015 and now work in tax credit investing. To me, Northwestern means a community of support, pushing us all to be our best.

Speaker 2: And my name is Brenna Helppie-Schmieder. I am also an alum. I graduated from Northwestern University as an undergrad in 2011, and from the law school in 2016. To me, Northwestern Law means pushing oneself intellectually and learning how to turn ideals into action.

Speaker 3: And my name is Chime Asonye, and I graduated from Northwestern Law in 2015, and now I work as the founder of Nigerian Mental Health, Nigeria's largest multidisciplinary network of practitioners focus on mental health policy research, wellness programing and disability inclusion.

Speaker 2: Now you are standing in the McCormick Social Justice hallway, the first major project of the Visibility Initiative. Artworks are arranged chronologically, like a timeline to show the relationship between different social justice movements. Highlights include the Civil Rights movement, the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the legalization of same sex marriage.

Speaker 1: The artworks in this hallway were selected with the help of the NLaw community. Organizers used an email campaign to solicit images that either captured effective social justice movements, or that invoked the reasons behind choosing to attend the law school. This project was logistically difficult to implement to hand copies of each photograph in the law school. School officials had to locate the original artists, ask permission, and pay for the right to use the work. Ethical collection management means respecting the artist's right to control and profit from the artwork.

Brenna Helppie-Schmieder and I founded the Visibility Initiative in 2013 to ensure that the law school space reflected the diversity of the law community through documentation and celebration,

Speaker 3: and also to make sure that Northwestern felt at home and as a community. Traditionally, when we got to Northwestern Law, it was a place that had a lot of elite portraits and paintings featuring white men and judges and lawyers that were a constant. But that really reinforced an idea that a law only served the very narrow community, which is not true.

When we think of the law, we don't think it was just these power and privilege positions. Instead, we think about the diversity of individuals who really make social justice possible. That could be faith leaders, that could be civil rights component, that could be religious leaders, that could be artists, and that needs to be reflective in the type of aesthetics that are in the law school.

So we really saw our work as an aesthetic disruption to engender new realities and possibilities of what social justice really meant.

Speaker 1: by advocating for diverse forms of expression such as sculpture, graffiti, photography and fiber based works.

Speaker 3: Different elements and structural reforms in terms of ramps, so that campus was more accessibility and to really disrupt our ideas of what justice were, to make it more reflective of a true commitment to individuals, minorities and individuals in the community.

Speaker 1: We recognized that the student body of our classmates was not reflected in the art and imagery around the law school. With the changes we made, we wanted to send a message of inclusivity and support that just because you may be different or have a different background from some of the early members of the law school community, that did not mean that you did not deserve support and help and success through the law school.

Speaker 3: What I'm the most proudest of the Visibility Initiative, is its legacy. The fact that it's been a huge constant at the law school with individuals who are really passionate about what social justice looks like.

It reminds me of the quote that justice is about the long arc towards justice, and so that means individuals need to come and continue fighting. And that means with new aesthetics, with new images about the cars being a folding idea of what social justice is. It's also important to understand how we leverage space in very powerful ways. A lot of people think that social justice is just out there in the public externally, but it exists in our everyday settings, in our institutions, in our schools.

And it's been amazing to come back to Northwestern law and see images like in the library, where there's a young lady with her hair curly and it being washed, and it really reminds me of my three sisters and how they would fit in and feel comfortable in a space like this.

It reminds me of home, and honestly, when I was at the law school, it never felt that home to me. And when I came back and saw that image, I imagined a young person in my setting who would see themselves reflected on the walls and felt like Northwestern Law was a place that was inclusive towards them.

Speaker 1: Leveraging space in these ways is powerful. Even though fundraising for additional projects has been difficult, the Visibility Initiative was chosen as the graduating class gift several times between 2014 and 2018.

Speaker 2: What emotions arise when reflecting on the theme of disrupting traditional narratives of power and privilege within a physical environment? How does the continued display within the McCormick Social Justice Hallway support these aims? And which social movements inspire your own trajectory?

Speaker 3: What advice I'd give for individuals looking to get involved is what is your idea of what justice look like and inclusion looks like. Those things should be reflected, and it doesn't just have to be reflected on a wall, but things that humanize that ideas. It could be in reaching out to the community. It could be in putting up new portraits. It could be about hosting plays and community discussions. We need to make sure that we enhance our connections to issues of justice,

Speaker 1: Before navigating to core tour stop number 11, consider stopping to visit the sponsored stops of the Women's Leadership Coalition, the Native American Law Students Association, and the Disability Law Society.

Speaker 3: With that, to resume the core tour, please return to the ground floor of Rubloff, passing Harry's Cafe along the way.