

Audio Transcript, Stop 9: 2000-2010

My name is Peter and I'm a professor who teaches copyright, IP, and first year property law. I've worked at Northwestern for 16 years. To me, Northwestern means a long history of students from a wide range of backgrounds who support each other, stay connected, and go on to do amazing things.

If class isn't in session, you are likely standing inside Strawn Hall, surrounded by portraits of alumni and professors. Three of the images might stand out to you because they're painted in a more contemporary style, reflecting differences in taste and resources of the time in which they were commissioned. They are also the only portraits that depict people of color.

Until 2010, the portraits on display in Strawn Hall were devoid of diversity. That's when law student Todd Belcore decided to make a change. I knew Todd a bit during his law school years. He showed real leadership on this issue and has done a lot for the law school community, both as a student and an alum.

Todd started the Portraits of Diverse Alumni program, rallying alumni and students to fundraise for new portraits. Despite difficulty funding the project, students were passionate about their efforts to correct historical oversights in the NLaw art collection.

With community support, funds were raised for a new series of portraits by artist Rebecca Crouch Pelham, a Chicago native who previously studied at renowned HBCU Howard University.

The portrait of Simeon R Acoba, a former Associate Justice of the Hawai'i State Supreme Court, was intended to be the first of five, followed by Dalveer Bhandari, Reuben Castillo, Dawn Clark Netsch, and Sophia Hall. But funds did not allow for the series to be completed. A portrait of Thurgood Marshall also hangs in the hall, though it was not part of the Portraits of Diverse Alumni program.

The law school commissioned Crouch-Pelham to produce a portrait of Harold Washington, the first black mayor of Chicago, in support of the program. In the portrait, Washington wears a black suit and red tie and appears in front of the US and Chicago flags.

There were many barriers to the portraits of diverse alumni program, including limited funding, lack of institutional knowledge, and limited time to complete the program.

However, both the student leaders and the artist put forth their best work to bring welcome diversity to the halls of law.

Their work is continued by the Visibility Initiative, a student led arts organization discussed in the next stop.

As you leave Strawn, reflect on the complexities of balancing artistic vision, financial constraints, and community expectations. How does the incomplete execution of the Portraits of Diverse Alumni program prompt us to consider the limitations of individual efforts in effecting systemic change?

What role can institutional memory and knowledge sharing play in ensuring the continuity and success of initiatives aimed at promoting diversity and representation?

Before navigating to core tour stop number ten, consider visiting the sponsored stops of the Asian and Pacific Islander Law Students Association, the LLM Committee, representing International law students, and OUTLAW, representing LGBTIQ+ law students.

The core tour will resume in the McCormick Social Justice Hallway just outside of Strawn Hall.