

## UVA LAW | public service kickoff 2022

SPEAKER: Welcome. I'm so happy to see you all here and what a turnout. This is just so exciting to see so many people. Thank you to Swati and Sabrina and to Mia for the introduction and for organizing. And to everyone from PILA, the program in law and public service in the Public Service Center who worked so hard to put this event together. It's going to be a great event.

So I spoke at orientation about the responsibility and obligation that come with the power of being a lawyer and the privilege and the opportunity of being a lawyer. And that you are empowered to make change in the world and that are fortunate to have the tools, the education, and the resources to do so.

The fact that you are standing here means you already feel the obligation of being a lawyer. You are already thinking about how you're going to serve the public. And this event really is all about providing you with resources and information about how you can start doing that immediately and throughout your time at the law school as well as beyond.

It is our goal to help you fulfill your public service dreams in every way that we can. And I hope you look around here this evening and see not only your classmates and your peers and 2Ls and 3Ls, but also, so many students, alumni, administrators, faculty, members of the LAGC staff, and community who all consider ourselves part of this public service community.

And I will say, I am proud to consider myself a part of it, too. Many of my most significant law school experiences were public service experiences, were the prison clinic that I was a student in, my extracurricular activities, working with the Prison Project and a migrant farmworker legal aid, my summer spent at the NAACP LDF Rural Legal Aid and the Southern Center for Human Rights.

These were critical to my development as a professional, as a lawyer, to my thoughts and understanding of the law, and to judgment and integrity that I learned in those roles and in those interactions. So I consider myself part of our public service community, if you'll have me.

And I have been so thrilled at the growth in our programs and support over the last 15 years or so. We really do have a classroom through career, a public service program that consists of financial, academic, personal, communal, and professional support. You're going to hear details about all of those pieces in a minute from all of the people who run them.

We have especially been focused on increasing our financial support over the last couple of years. But we continue to think about how to improve and expand our program to make sure that everyone is able to take advantage of it and to pursue the public service careers of their dreams. So I hope you'll continue to generate ideas about what that might look like.

This commitment to public service-- the resources we spend are fairly new and modern part of the law school's history. But the commitment is not at all new. This law school was founded to create public servants and leaders for this democracy and promoters of justice and the rule of law.

Over our two cents history, who is imagined as being those leaders, those public servants, and those lawyers has changed radically. But the idea that we are continuing to educate students for service has not really changed. The way that our graduates serve, I think, has expanded. We continue to have, as we have had for many decades, legal aid lawyers, prosecutors, public defenders, elected officials who graduate into those jobs.

In addition, our graduates go on to work at Federal Reserve banks, at think tanks, at NGOs as climate action crusaders, as JAG lawyers, as impact litigators. And over time, there have been so many alums who now work in public servants-- in public service and who are public leaders that there are too many to name. But it is suffice it to say that we have a long and storied past of public service as well as a bright future.

In my view, when I think about the mission of our law school, we have a three part mission. One part is to educate you all. A second part is to create new knowledge and discovery and help improve the law. And a third part is public service. That is a full third part of our mission.

And I think that's true because I think every law school has a mission of public service. I think every public law school, especially, should have a mission of public service. And I think, especially, this one, which was created to serve the public has such a mission.

So you could not have chosen a better place or a better time. There is a lot of need to educate yourself to become public servants. We are so glad that you have chosen UVA and so excited to support you during your time here, and once we launch you on your career, which I are in your first week of school.

So it's hard to imagine that we're already thinking about your careers after you graduate. But we are, I know you are, too. And we are thrilled to see where you will head. So it is now my honor and privilege to introduce two people who have dedicated their professional lives to public service here in Charlottesville. Harold Folley, Jr. Is the senior supervising organizer with the Civil Rights and Racial Justice program at the Legal Aid Justice Center here in Charlottesville.

In his role, he organizes and strategizes with a coalition of racial justice groups, nonprofit organizations, and individuals on the front lines of racial justice in Charlottesville. Harold has many years of experience as a community organizer and leader. He has worked on national, state, and local issues as an organizer with Virginia Organizing, a nonpartisan, statewide, grassroots organization dedicated to challenging injustice.

He spent four years as a community organizer with the Charlottesville Public Housing Association of Residents, PHAR. You will hear about that, I'm sure, in the conversation, and we'll hear about it more generally in Charlottesville, whose mission is to educate and empower low income residents to protect and improve their own communities through collective action.

And he's also coordinated the West Haven After School Program for eight years helping to create a safe learning environment for the children of Charlottesville's West Haven community.

Wyatt Rolla first joined LAJC immediately after law school graduation in 2013. They've had many roles at LAJC. Attorney for the Economic Justice Program, housing team coordinator, attorney, and then, Interim Director of the Civil Rights and Racial Justice Program, and now serves as the Senior Movement Attorney at LAJC.

Wyatt's work involves the blending of legal and organizing tools to make positive change. A graduate of the College of William and Mary, and I'm proud to say, of this law school in 2013 and one of my own students, Wyatt's career has, like Harold's, been dedicated to helping communities and individuals leverage legal and other tools to make such change.

Outside of their work at LAJC, Wyatt has also served as a founding member of the National Lawyers Guild of Central Virginia, a member of the Advisory Council for the Charlottesville Public Housing Association of Residents, and is a lecturer and clinical instructor here at the law school to the great benefit of our students.

A great deal of my own work as a legal historian has been studying how many people it takes working on different levels and in different parts of the legal change process to make change in our society. And as I said at orientation, we often think of only national figures out there making change in the world. The famous people on the national stage.

But as Wyatt's and Harold's career show us, all of us have the capacity to make change in the world. All of us have the capacity to make our own communities better, more just, and more equitable places to participate in the kinds of transformations that get written down in the history books.

I am so delighted and so honored to have Wyatt and Harold with us this evening. There is so much we can learn from them about their work to effect change locally and at the state and national levels. Without further ado, please join me in welcoming Harold Folley and Wyatt Rolla.

**WYATT ROLLA:** My name is Wyatt.

**HAROLD** Mic check. My name is Harold.

**FOLLEY:**

**WYATT ROLLA:** This is a lot more people than we're in this room when I was a 1L. I'm just going to say that. So a joint keynote is a little bit odd. Harold and I actually asked each other. We're like, have you ever seen a joint keynote? And both of us were like, nope.

But that's OK because we work every day trying to build something that's also kind of new, which is a deep partnership between lawyers and organizers. And not just theorizing about that, but again, practicing that every day. So what that means to us is we both believe that the people closest to the problem are frequently the experts on the problem.

And it also means that what we think makes deep lasting change is the collective effort of many-- what folks would call ordinary people. So we're going to do the best to model-- the partnership of lawyers and organizers that we think is necessary for that kind of change in our talk today.

What we're going to do is actually have a conversation with each other. We're going to talk to each other about what brought us to this work, what put us on the path, what sustained us on this path. And then, if someone will be generous enough to tell us how much time we have, we'd love to open it up to you all to have a conversation with you as well because we'd love for this to be a collective, if we have time for that.

Yeah, with that said.

**HAROLD** Let's do it.

**FOLLEY:**

**WYATT ROLLA:** Are you ready?

**HAROLD** Yeah.

**FOLLEY:**

**WYATT ROLLA:** Are you ready for the first question? OK, so Harold, what lit the fire for you of becoming an organizer?

**HAROLD** So what lit the fire for me was-- my life hasn't been so cut and dry. I spent some time in the federal institution for selling drugs. And when I got there, what I noticed was-- from Charlottesville, you don't see too many folks that were Black or you don't see too many over white folks at that time.

**FOLLEY:**

And so when I got locked up and they sent me to prison, I noticed there was so many Black folks there. And I was like, why is it so many Black people here? And I think that initiated my organizing. Because I looked up the population of Black folks in the United States, and it didn't match the population of the prison.

And so, right there, I automatically said, I have to do something about this. And what I did was I took the time that I was locked up to figure out how to get back out and do things that will help my community, not harm my community.

So that what initiated the fire under my feet to want to do better for my community and make my community a better place. So my question to you. What triggered you to become a lawyer?

**WYATT ROLLA:** Yeah, so when we were drafting these questions, obviously, it really struck me that I've thought a lot about what it was that drew me to change work or to movement work. And I could tell a lot of stories about that. I grew up as a gender nonconforming queer person in the South. I grew up in a union family. Both my grandparents were union members. My grandfather was a garment worker. The other one was a union railroad worker.

But I haven't thought as much about what it was that made me decide to be a lawyer. So I really pondered this to answer it for you all. And I think-- so I graduated from college-- to age myself-- in 2008. So there weren't a lot of-- folks, remember that was the Great Recession.

So there weren't a lot of job opportunities knocking the door down. And I remember I bought an LSAT prep book right when I graduated college. It was orange. And I was reading it and I was really-- I think I just had this sense that I might be good at being a lawyer. When you said what drew me to it. I was like, OK, I-- Harold knows. I'm wonky. I like systems. I like to tackle a problem. I really like to read and write.

So that really drew me, but I also-- I had this really deep ambivalence because I just-- the legal system was so-- at least where I had been in the South, had been so removed from the kind of change work that I had found most impactful. And I realized I actually didn't know any lawyers that had been involved in the campaigns that I had worked on.

So I shelved my book. I moved to Richmond and I worked as-- I waited tables, I was a personal trainer, I made people coffee, I painted houses. But I also did a lot of unpaid organizing work. And Harold and I actually met each other many years ago before we worked at LAJC.

So the two biggest things that really gripped me during the time I worked for a grassroots abortion fund as an intake counselor connecting people who needed abortion to financial grants to access those medical services. And I worked organizing tenants in a public housing community in Richmond. A group called Reframe Residents of Public Housing of Richmond Against Mass Eviction and promises coming back to lawyers.

Because LAJC, actually, was staffing those meetings-- reframes meetings. So I would go to them. And Pat Levy-Lavelle, who is now my coworker, would be at these meetings. And he would take notes on flip charts. Pat is very-- he's a very humble genius. If you take the employment clinic, you will meet him.

And if someone had a question, he could name the regulation-- whatever the public housing notice that was applicable. But he was very much a technician in the change efforts for-- that were led by the residents. And I just remember-- I remember a distinct day where Pat was taking his bicycle and he had Pampers balanced on the cross beams and it was for his kid. He was biking home and I was like, I think I could be that kind of lawyer.

So that seeing that what organizing in law could look like was what made me be like, OK, I can pick that book back up and feel comfortable with it. So Harold, being an organizer is not easy. I have seen you in many conflicts. What was the hardest part of learning to become an organizer and do the work that you can do today?

**HAROLD  
FOLLEY:**

I think the hardest part is understanding that people are different, right? Understanding that people come to the table with different skills and different attitudes and how to weave them together. I think the hardest part, though, for me, is conflict.

Because what one of my People's Coalition members would say, we need conflict to be able to overcome what we're doing. And that's conflict inside. But when that conflict do come, it's really hard to deal with sometimes. Because you don't want to piss anybody off or say you can't be here no more. Because what I believe that people bring-- every person brings something to the table.

I'll tell you a quick story. When I try to get people involved, people always say, I don't have the time. I don't have-- I can't do this or I really want to do this. I always tell people, well, can you bake me some cookies and bring it to the meeting, right? Because once they get into the meeting, they'll bring cookies for the rest of their lives coming to the meeting, all right?

But I don't want them to bring the cookies, come to a meeting, and get involved with a conflict. And the first thing that I do when it's a conflict-- because conflicts does-- do happen. The first thing I do is trying to resolve it. And then, after the meeting or something, I will definitely call both the parties and see why the conflict was happening.

But it gets really-- sometimes, conflict get really so bad that sometimes you think those folks are going to fight, right? But what it is is people are so passionate about the bullshit that's been happening to them so many so much in their life that they ready to do something about it.

And they feel like, sometimes, you can't do anything about it because, sometimes, the lawyers say, hey, we got to slow down, right? And then, sometimes, the community folks say, hey lawyers, we need to slow down. So if there is some conflicts between community members, but also, there is conflict between lawyers.

But what we have found out at LAJC is we understand that there are going to be conflicts. And the people I work with, Theresa is one of the best persons I know to help with resolving conflicts sometimes, right? So I have to lean on folks also to help me figure it out. But conflict is the most-- I mean, it's like, at a meeting-- you're in a meeting can you imagine-- you're in a meeting, the meeting going well. Then, all of a sudden, the meeting just blow up.

People are cussing each other out. And so, that's-- I think that's the most difficult part of being an organizer. How to resolve those conflicts on the fly. So what is the hardest part about learning to be a lawyer?

**WYATT ROLLA:** Lawyers get in a lot of fights, too, but I'm not going to choose that. I think, especially since many of you are 1Ls, the hardest part for me of learning to be a lawyer was actually learning the nuts and bolts of practicing.

There are a lot of-- you will have to learn a lot of Black letter law things. You will have to learn client interviewing. You will have to learn what it takes to file a lawsuit in state court, which you will not learn in law school. And it's a lot of things, right?

And at the same time, for me, I was trying to wrestle with what my role as a lawyer should be to make change. I feel like-- I used to tell people sometimes it felt like-- it's like you're playing chess in the middle of a bar fight. These high volume legal services and then having this other running thing in my brain about what is the appropriate role for me and how can I support communities in making change.

And actually, I remember I asked a lawyer in-- a civil rights lawyer in town when-- my fellowship was in Charlottesville and was actually doing individual case service. I did eviction defense. I did conditions cases. And I also was general counsel for the Public Housing Association of Residents. So I was representing a tenant organization.

And I asked him, basically, will you be my movement lawyering and mentor. And he said to me, I think should just learn how to be a lawyer first. And I mean, I understand the impulse, but I also-- I was up in it already, right? Those questions came up every day and how I should relate to my clients and are they even my clients? They're really residents, right? What does it mean to show up and have a broader relationship with them that doesn't have that power dynamic.

So I think one of the things that I would to sneak in a piece of advice or tip before we get to that section is, I really valued the seminar courses and independent studies I did in law school that allowed me to wrestle with that question when I had the time and intellectual space to do it. And I thought a lot about it by the time I actually started practicing.

What is my theory of change? What do I think lawyers role in social movements should be? And how do I envision doing that? And I think that helped me, but that was still really hard. I think that was the hardest part for me of trying to just understand how to also be a technical lawyer.

You also want a lawyer who's going to answer your question correctly at the same time as you want a lawyer who is going to not be heinous to work with. So Harold, you just mentioned conflict, people yelling, screaming, using profanity, I've seen all of these things.

In light of all that, what makes this sustainable for you? Harold has been doing organizing work for, I mean, close to two decades? Over two decades? Close to two decades? What makes this work sustainable for you?

**HAROLD  
FOLLEY:**

Well, I think what makes the work sustainable for me is seeing people move up the leadership ladder, right? When I talk about someone coming in and just saying, I want to bake cookies. But to see that person go from baking cookies to writing a letter to the editor to sitting down to talking to a legislator about what is the problem to becoming leader in their own community, that is what makes me-- give me the fuel to keep going.

Because I can tell you a story about the People's Coalition. That's the coalition that I facilitate. We started our journey in trying to get a police oversight board here in Charlottesville in 2018. And by 2019, the People's Coalition was the force in helping create the bylaws and the ordinance for this oversight board. And in 2019, city council shot it down and said, we are a dealing-room state, and we can't do this. We've got to get permission from the legislator-- the General Assembly.

And what was amazing to me is, in the pandemic, the People's Coalition decided to keep doing it. Keep going to the legislators. Keep having those conversations. I'm talking about folks who never been in a room with a legislator having conversations with legislators about how important it is to make sure police don't brutalize people living in Black and Brown communities.

With that said, what happened was they passed-- in the General Assembly, one of the most strongest oversight bill that Virginia ever had. And it's up to really the-- up to the localities to take it up. But it made the People's Coalition gel together. And believe me, it was some fights inside of there that sometimes I was like, oh my goodness. But then, what happened was they would fight, cuss each other out, come to the next meetings like, what we got to do now, right?

But just seeing the emotion and passion that folks had for this bill was or is or have been what has kept me keep going and to being Harold Folley, the organizer of the People's Coalition.

So Wyatt, what sustains you? What makes you sustainable in your work that you do as a lawyer?

**WYATT ROLLA:** Yeah, I think when I used to tell people-- I think, like I said, I didn't think much about why I became a lawyer. But when I used to tell people, I feel like my elevator pitch answer would be, I wanted to be a tool in the toolbox for change. I thought there were many different tools. I believe organizing is one of the primary ones, but I wanted to be like an Allen wrench for justice.

And I think that's true. But the more I thought about it, I think the reason that-- what really drew me to this work is I wanted that tool to be something that I could offer to people as a way to be in relationship to them. To say, oh, you're trying to build that piece of IKEA furniture. Here, I am this thing that can help you with that.

And the reason I wanted to do that is because I wanted to have relationships with those people and I wanted to have relationships across all kinds of difference that are deeply de facto segregated and separated in our society still.

And those relationships are what sustain me, I think. I feel like there's a rhetoric where I'm being a public servant like, oh, you are sacrificing your big law firm salary and you are doing this thing out of the goodness of your heart.

I mean, I do this because it makes me more human. I feel less alienated. I feel more grounded in the world. I like my life. That is why I do this. And I feel sustained by those relationships. I feel sustained by Harold's. We've been in a relationship with one another for over a decade and doing work together. And that really grounds me. So I think that is what I would say.