

A Skadden Fellowship for Trial Lawyers? This Litigation Firm Wants to Cultivate the Next Generation

Hueston Hennigan has partnered with five top law schools to create the Social Justice Legal Foundation, which aims to be an incubator for the next generation of social justice-focused trial lawyers.

By Karen Sloan

Last year, in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd, partners at the litigation firm Hueston Hennigan began mulling how they could help address the myriad equality challenges the nation faces.

They were inspired by the legacy of Thurgood Marshall, who successfully tried a number of seminal civil rights cases—*Brown v. Board of Education* among them—before ascending to the U.S. Supreme Court. The next generation of trail-blazing social justice-focused trial lawyers needs an incubator, they reasoned, and where better to start than their own law firm?

Thus, Hueston Hennigan partners have committed \$10 million to launch the Social Justice Legal Foundation, which is a nonprofit arm of the firm that will bring on fellows from five top law schools to try cases addressing key social justice issues, and be mentored by

established trial attorneys. Name partner John Hueston said he believes it is the first such fellowship program to bring together a trial firm and law schools.

“When we came up with the idea here—which really was the idea of a collaboration between private sector trial lawyers and leading law schools, to try to get a unique blend of courtroom talent and academic thoughts and a mentor program—we really felt like we were coming up with something innovative,” Hueston said.

The Social Justice Legal Foundation is a partnership with Columbia Law School; Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law; Stanford Law School; the University of California at Los Angeles School of Law; and Yale Law School. Beginning this spring, the foundation will select one third-year student from each participating school



John Hueston of Hueston Hennigan.

for a two-year post-graduate fellowship. The fellows will receive an annual \$70,000 salary plus benefits and funding for bar study. During those two years, they will help vet and pursue groundbreaking social justice and equity cases, while learning alongside experienced trial lawyers, activists and academics. The fellows will be overseen by an executive director and two full-time staff attorneys, with Hueston Hennigan attorneys offering pro bono assistance.

The program is something of a trial firm version of the Skadden Fellowship, although the fellows will work within the foundation instead of going to established public interest organizations like Skadden fellows do. Hueston said he hopes the foundation becomes a model for other litigation firms, which haven't historically had the same tight relationships with law schools that Big Law firms do.

"I think it's unusual to have a law school collaboration with a firm that's more trial focused—that's not a firm with an appellate group that will have people assisting with research and writing," he said. "That, for sure, is something that distinguishes what we're doing."

The foundation will rotate its focus every two years between six key areas: housing and homeless discrimination; LGBTQ+ rights; immigrant justice; voting rights; criminal justice reform; Native American discrimination; and economic justice. The foundation's leadership, academic partners, fellows and its Board of Advisors will work together to determine which are to tackle during each two-year period.

That board includes a number of legal heavy hitters, including retired

California Supreme Court Justice Carlos Moreno, Western Center on Law & Poverty Executive Director Crystal Crawford, and U.S. District Judge David Carter of the Central District of California. It also includes representatives from each of the five participating law schools. Carter said in an interview Thursday that he hopes the foundation will help improve access to justice.

"I've always had a passion for the underprivileged," Carter said. "I've always felt that the challenge of the courts is accessibility to justice. I've felt very strongly over my 40 years on the bench that certain groups just can't gain access or have a more difficult time gaining access. Justice, to me, means that our humblest citizens have access and have a voice in the court system."

The foundation is now accepting applications from 2021 law graduates. Hueston said they will be looking for candidates who are excited about creating change. And he emphasized that the foundation is a long-term project, not just a flash-in-the-pan response to current events.

"It's not an experiment or a fling," he said. "It's something that the partners

and others are dedicated to supporting for many years. The legacy that I'd like to leave is that this has a permanence beyond the private firm that gave birth to it."

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