

Changing the Face of the Dallas Legal Community

The Sarah T. Hughes Diversity Scholarship History
May 2023

When **Judge Sarah T. Hughes** left the Dallas Bar Foundation (DBF) Board meeting in February 1982, she likely thought the meeting was over. What happened next helped to change history and the face of the Dallas legal community.

The Board minutes reflect “enthusiastic approval and common consent” to naming the recently created Diversity Law Scholarship at SMU after Judge Hughes. It was the right time, the right place, and the right initiative to honor the generous trailblazer—just three months later, Judge Hughes suffered a stroke that ended her participation in public life.

The diminutive (five feet tall) Hughes had been no stranger to changing the course of history. She graduated from George Washington University Law School in 1922 while working as a police officer during the day. She led her graduating class in recognition and activities. By 1931, she became one of three women serving in the Texas Legislature and, just four years later, Hughes was appointed to the 14th District Court in Dallas—a time when women were not allowed to serve as jurors in her court. The attorney (and former DBA leader) campaigning against the Hughes appointment insisted women should be home washing dishes. That argument failed.



Almost 50 years and many feats later, Judge Hughes remained a catalyst for change. This time she joined the weight of other DBA leaders to create a life-changing scholarship.

The idea originated with **Larry Newman**. With the help of DBA President-Elect **Darrell Jordan**, **Tim Gonzalez** and **Foster Reese** presented the proposal to the Foundation in May of 1981—the goal was to create “a scholarship and clerkship program to attract minority

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lawyers to the community.” Reese emphasized the small ratio of minority lawyers compared to the City’s diverse population. Judge Hughes moved to accept the recommendation, which carried unanimously. The Foundation would serve as the repository for funds. Foundation funds for the Hughes scholarship—which covers three years of law school tuition—have now exceeded \$2.8 million. The scholarship was expanded in 2015 to include not only SMU, but UNT Dallas College of Law, and Texas A&M University School of Law.

Proceeds from “Bar None” have served as the main funding source, and the annual program “An Evening With...”, added by the Foundation in 2011, has provided an additional resource. The Collins Clerkships were added in 1989 to provide jobs for minority law school students. Grants to date are close to \$700,000 and have provided summer work with courts and government offices. These placements primarily attract Hughes Scholars.

Both the history and funding for the Hughes scholarship are groundbreaking. But, to quote **Elizabeth Philipp**, the Foundation’s Executive Director, “the most important part of the story is about the students and the cycles of success the scholarship has created in our community.”

The experiences shared by the students include introductions and access that inform the workings of our justice system and the impact lawyers can have in the community. Former Supreme Court of Texas Justice **Eva Guzman** has generously contributed to these insights.

Justice Guzman served as a mentor to the Collins Clerks each year she was asked to participate continuing the long tradition of the Supreme Court of Texas accepting a Collins Clerk. She used that opportunity to expose the students to the inner workings of the Court and to introduce them to her service with the Access to Justice Commission.

Describing some of the greatest moments in her 22 years in the judiciary as mentoring young lawyers, Justice Guzman related her goal of inspiring them to pursue their highest aspirations.

The word “access” is key to understanding the purpose and impact of the Hughes scholarship. The exceptional individuals receiving the grants most often come from backgrounds that require unique courage and endurance. Many have worked to care for their families and have delayed educational decisions as a result. Some have suffered unspeakable tragedies. All have grit and have demonstrated the ability to exceed their aspirations with access to the financial and mentoring means available through the scholarship.

Gabe Vazquez describes the Hughes scholarship as changing the course of his life. Having received the award over 20 years ago, Vazquez now serves as Secretary-Treasurer for the Foundation. He also served as Grants Committee Chair. A first generation American, Vazquez’s immigrant parents sacrificed to sustain him and his three siblings and make sure they had the best education possible. Vazquez excelled and was admitted to Harvard and Stanford for college. He went to SMU because of scholarship funds. Then, inspired to stay in Dallas, Vazquez applied for the Hughes Scholarship.

The scholarship gave Vazquez the financial and mentoring means to attend and succeed in SMU law school. He credits this access as inspiration for giving back. That course has him fully engaged as a community leader and volunteer and, importantly, a tireless mentor for aspiring lawyers. He describes the process as a talent pipeline with the expectation that you not forget to turn back around and help the next one in line. Vazquez targets hubris as the enemy and defines the diversity scholarship as a chance to show up, use the grit that has gotten you this far, and take advantage of the opportunity and support to be one’s best. His main message

to new Hughes scholars is “we believe in you.”

Recent UNT Dallas College of Law graduate and new lawyer **Semaj Garrett** echoes the messaging Vazquez shares. Garrett is a mother of three who describes her Hughes scholarship as life-defining. Prior to receiving the scholarship in her first year of law school, Garrett was working full time, attending night school, and caring for her family. The funds freed up her mental capacity to focus on academics. But, as she explains, “it was not just a scholarship.”

Being a Hughes Scholar came with a message to Garrett that she matters, is accepted, and has a place in our legal community. She emphasizes that not everyone feels that. While determination kept her on a courageous journey, the sheer impact of the opportunities opened to her as a lawyer have propelled Garrett into roles where she can begin giving back.

Rey Rodriguez was one of the early Hughes Scholars over 30 years ago and he too surmises he probably would not be a lawyer or in Dallas but for the scholarship. Rodriguez grew up in El Paso with self-made parents who endured multiple challenges to become teachers. He had no choice but to be a good student, which paid off with high scores and scholarship opportunities.

Rodriguez led his SMU law school class as the Valedictorian and scored the highest on the Texas Bar exam. Despite these talents, Rodriguez insists he likely would have stayed and taught in El Paso if not for the scholarship. He echoes the sentiments of Vazquez and Garrett—the immense access and encouragement he received put him on the path to give back—and he has done so financially, as a mentor, and as a leader in every capacity with the Foundation.

These experiences and stories illustrate the significance of the Hughes scholarship as a gamechanger. As described by Victoria Nguyen, a 2019 SMU law graduate, the recipients of the scholarship “don’t just lack financial resources.” Nguyen emphasizes that, like her, the students frequently lack access to intergenerational social capital. She has made it her mission, based on her experience and in gratitude to the Foundation, to perpetuate cycles of success by continuing to be a resource and mentor for future Scholars.

When Larry Newman proposed a diversity scholarship in 1981, he never imagined the impact. Hughes Scholars have become leaders in all aspects of the Dallas community and have made our Bar more representative. They serve in all parts of the legal profession, including the judiciary. Federal Magistrate Judge Irma Ramirez, an early Hughes Scholar, is one of those leaders the Foundation credits.

These heroes, and more who are too many to recount here, have helped change the course of history and the face of the Dallas legal community. No clearer example exists that we all stand on the shoulders of those who came before, including Judge Sarah T. Hughes.

Hon. Mary Murphy, Senior Justice, 5th District Court of Appeals (Retired), is a past Chair of the Dallas Bar Foundation.