



Daryl Atkinson: Recent Graduate of the University of St. Thomas School of Law

[By Heather Jung]

On Saturday, May 12, the University of St. Thomas (UST) School of Law held its commencement ceremony for the class of 2007. Among the members of the school's fourth graduating class was Daryl Atkinson, who served as the student speaker at the graduation ceremony, an honor for which he was elected by his peers.

"I want my classmates to take a moment and revel in the tremendous accomplishment of graduating from law school," Atkinson said of the message he wanted to convey in his speech. "Coupled with this accomplishment is an enormous responsibility to society. I hope to highlight a few of these responsibilities and encourage my classmates to embrace the challenge of meeting these responsibilities head-on."

Atkinson began his law school career after graduating summa cum laude from Benedict College with his degree in political science in 2004. He said that he wanted to become a lawyer in order to "be an advocate for the marginalized members of our society."

During his time in law school, Atkinson kept himself busy. In addition to handling the rigorous class schedule associated with law school, he participated in an externship offered by the School of Law, he was an active member of the Black Law Students Association, and he participated in a prison ministry at the Macedonia Baptist Church.

During the summer after his first year, Atkinson participated in a "Crime and Justice Externship" offered by the School of Law at the Council of Crime and Justice (CCJ), a nonprofit organization "that focuses on exposing and alleviating racial disparities in the criminal justice system," according to Atkinson.

"During my externship at CCJ, I created a database listing the collateral sanctions that accompany felony convictions, synthesized state laws controlling access to criminal record information in all 50 jurisdictions, and developed policy statements that addressed disparities in the criminal justice system," said Atkinson.

Atkinson also served as the vice president of the Black Law Students Association last year. He said that the organization's purpose is to:

- Articulate and promote the professional needs and goals of Black Law Students;
- Foster and encourage professional competence;
- Focus upon the relationship of the Black Law Student and the Black Attorney to the American legal structure;

- Instill in the Black Attorney and Law Student a greater awareness and commitment to the needs of the Black community;
- Influence the legal community to bring out meaningful change to meet the needs of the Black community;
- Adopt and implement a policy of economic independence;
- Encourage Black Law Students to pursue careers in the judiciary; and
- Do all things necessary and appropriate to accomplish these purposes.

"My involvement in student organizations at UST has improved my time-management and organizational skills," said Atkinson. "In addition, student organizations at St. Thomas assist in raising the consciousness of the student body to issues not discussed in a traditional law school curriculum."

It was also during his second year, in 2005, that he became involved in the prison ministry at Macedonia Baptist Church. The prison ministry has been a staple at the Minneapolis-based church for more than 20 years. Participants visit and participate in religious services with incarcerated men at the Faribault Correctional Facility.

Q. What do you do for fun?

A. I exercise, read, and spend time with my fiancée for fun.

Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?

A. *The Best of John Coltrane.*

Q. What is the last magazine you read?

A. *ESPN the Magazine.*

Q. What is your favorite TV show?

A. *Grey's Anatomy.*

Q. Who is your role model?

A. My parents are my role models.



Atkinson said that shortly after he began participating in the program, the church leaders decided to expand the ministry in order to “address prisoner reentry issues.” Atkinson helped create the Lazarus Reentry Initiative, a 501(c)(3) organization aimed at helping former offenders reintegrate into the local community.

“I think organizations like the prison ministry and Lazarus Reentry Initiative are important because they illustrate that civil society is willing to assist the government in addressing pressing legal and social problems,” Atkinson said.

In 2006, Atkinson was awarded the Living the Mission Award by the UST faculty “for excellence in Scholarly Engagement and Social Reform”—specifically for his work on the reentry program, which he called a “tangible illustration of a student living the law school’s mission.”

According to Atkinson, the person who has influenced him the most during his law school career is George T. Stephenson, a member of the Second Judicial District of Minnesota. Atkinson said that Judge Stephenson “serves as a mentor to a group of ex-offenders and probationers in St. Paul, Minnesota.” Atkinson participates in the group regularly and has been impressed by Judge Stephenson’s “willingness to invest his personal time in these young men.”

Atkinson graduated with cum laude recognition. He said that he and his fiancée, Naikia Byrd, are planning to move to Raleigh, North Carolina, where he plans to use his expertise to start a nonprofit similar to the Lazarus Reentry Program seeking to alleviate the barriers ex-inmates face when they are released. He said that, ideally, the program would participate in “impact litigation, legislative advocacy, and community outreach/education concerning reentry issues” and that he got the idea

based on the increasing number of people incarcerated in America’s prisons.

“Over the last 20 years, the prison population in the United States has dramatically increased,” Atkinson said. “90% of these offenders are eventually released; as a result, the social problem of ex-offender reentry has become prominent in the last decade. This problem disproportionately affects the African-American community; therefore, I felt compelled to use my legal training to help my community.”

ON THE NET

University of St. Thomas School of Law
www.stthomas.edu/law

Macedonia Baptist Church
www.letthefireburn.com

Judge George T. Stephenson
[www.courts.state.mn.us?
page=JudgeBio&ID=30311](http://www.courts.state.mn.us?page=JudgeBio&ID=30311)