

# FLORIDA STATE LAW



# A Tradition of Excellence: Black Alumni of FSU Law

*By Christi N. Morgan*

The College of Law is proud to count many successful Black lawyers and judges among its nearly 10,000 alumni. Graduates include judges, civil rights movement leaders, presidents of the National Bar Association, partners at top firms, high-ranking government attorneys, powerful lobbyists and innovative community leaders. These alumni are contributing to a tradition of excellence that shows future generations what is possible. This article features just some of FSU Law's successful Black alumni and provides information on a new organization that aims to support all Black graduates, students and professors.



## **Benjamin L. Crump**

FSU Law's most nationally recognized alumnus may be Benjamin "Ben" Crump ('95). An attorney for the families of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and many others, Crump is at the forefront of civil rights and racial justice movements and has been in the spotlight more than ever recently.

"This last year of 2020 has been an unprecedented year, not only because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also because of horrific injustices that have taken place," said Crump. "During the pandemic, it seems like everything shut down in America except racism and police brutality."

With clients all over the United States and frequent appearances on national news programs, Crump's schedule is extremely full. To best represent his national clientele, after seeking approval from his wife and daughter on his travel schedule, Crump typically flies to multiple cities each week.

"Normally I don't get to stay in one city beyond 24-36 hours before I have to go to the next city," said Crump.

Additionally, a Netflix documentary crew has been following Crump around the country for a project that is slated to air in 2022.

Crump's most recent legal victories include a record-setting \$621 million settlement on behalf of children who experienced lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan. Crump also won a \$411 million verdict in a Zoom trial on behalf of a Gadsden County, Florida man. Crump believes the second case is evidence that human emotions can transcend Zoom screens.

In addition to his recent law-related achievements, Crump also served as an executive producer and writer for a movie, "Woman in Motion," which tells the true story of Nichelle Nichols and her efforts to recruit women and minorities to work for NASA.

Although many of his fellow alumni do not practice in the area of civil rights, Crump says everyone can play a part in his goal to end racial injustices. "As Dr. King said, 'We all have a role to play in the struggle for equality and justice to make a better world for our children.' I absolutely believe that everybody's role is not to be on the front lines, but you can do something to try to make a difference in the world to help America live up to our high ideals of equal justice under the law for all American citizens."



### **JoLinda L. Herring**

In January 2021, JoLinda Herring ('96) was elected Bryant Miller Olive's (BMO) managing shareholder, becoming the first Black female to take the helm of the firm.

"This is an awesome honor," said Herring. "I am very proud of the work that the firm has done in the area of diversity and the work we are

continuing to do. Also, it allows other young women to know that they can reach similar heights. As Vice President Kamala Harris says, 'I am the first, but I do not expect to be the last.'"

As BMO's managing shareholder, Herring will lead the firm and help chart its strategic direction. She has been preparing for this job for a long time. Herring began clerking at the firm as a law student and joined BMO as an attorney in 1996, after graduating and passing the bar exam. During her time as co-chair of BMO's Public Finance Group—the largest practice group at the firm—Herring had many opportunities to lead and work with firm attorneys located across Florida and in Washington, D.C. and Atlanta.

"I did not have a goal to become managing shareholder," said Herring. "However, I have been a leader all of my life and my goal is to excel at all that I do. Because of my prior experience working in a family business, I was always interested in the business aspect of the firm."

In addition to the day-to-day responsibilities of managing the national firm, Herring aims to grow BMO's clientele. "My goal is to increase awareness of the services and value that BMO can offer to existing clients and prospective clients in new markets who may not otherwise know who we are and what we can do for them."



### **Carlos E. Moore**

This summer, Carlos Moore ('02) will take the helm of the National Bar Association (NBA), the largest national network of predominantly Black attorneys.

"It is the fulfillment of a dream first birthed in 2000 as a first-year law student," Moore said about becoming NBA president. "It's historic in that I'm the first Mississippian and first Cochran Firm lawyer to be elected to the

presidency. I'm excited about serving my people and standing for justice as the voice for the nation's 66,000 Black lawyers, judges and law students."

Moore is the third FSU Law alumnus to be elected president of the NBA in the past decade. Daryl Parks ('95) served as president in 2011-2012 and Ben Crump was president in 2015-2016. In addition, Moore's NBA general counsel is slated to be alumnus Sean Pittman ('94). Moore's presidential goals include fighting against voter suppression and police brutality, while fighting for criminal justice reform, economic justice, empowerment, civil rights, voting rights and social justice.

In addition to currently serving as president-elect of the NBA, Moore is managing partner of The Cochran Firm – Mississippi Delta, located in Grenada, Mississippi, and serves as the first Black municipal judge pro tem in both Grenada and Clarksdale, Mississippi. He primarily represents individuals in civil rights, personal injury and criminal defense cases. "The best part of my job is advocating for the little guy and giving a voice to the voiceless while leveling the playing field. I think of myself as the great equalizer."

Moore has earned numerous awards for his work, including being named one of the top 100 African American most influential leaders in the nation in the November 2020 issue of African Leadership Magazine.

Also in November 2020, Moore published a co-authored book, "The Five Brothers: Our Journeys to Successful Careers in Law & Medicine." The book chronicles the obstacles the

African-American authors—three attorneys, a judge and a physician—overcame to achieve their educational and professional goals.

“People needed to know the story behind the glory,” Moore said about why the book is important. “We are not overnight successes and overcame obstacles, beating the odds to become first-generation professionals. If we did it, so can others.”



### Federal Judge Mary Stenson Scriven

The Honorable Mary Stenson Scriven ('87) has served on the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida since 2008. Prior to that, she was a United States magistrate judge for the Middle District of Florida for more than 10 years. Scriven was the first Black woman to serve on the federal

bench in Florida.

“Serving in the federal judiciary allows me to participate in the preservation of the highest tenets and ideals of our system of justice,” said Scriven. “Those who know me know that I love every aspect of the law—from the most mundane discovery dispute to the most hotly contested, sophisticated business challenge involving complicated areas of law, to matters of life and liberty that arise in the criminal context. Working with highly competent litigators to ensure that justice is served and that every party has a fair ‘day in court’ is what motivates me.”

COVID-19 has greatly impacted Scriven’s work. She

currently chairs the court’s COVID-19 Committee for the Middle District of Florida and has become very proficient in Zoom and Teams. “We have held countless remote civil evidentiary and non-evidentiary hearings and criminal sentencings via Zoom as permitted under the CARES Act. Our court staff has worked tirelessly and sacrificially to ensure that litigants’ rights were preserved under these unprecedented circumstances.”

In January 2021, Scriven even hosted the first full Zoom jury trial in a Florida federal court. “The jurors never stepped foot in the courthouse, and we managed to select the jury, hold the trial and achieve a verdict in four days.”

Scriven also currently serves in numerous judicial leadership roles—she is the administrative judge for the Tampa Division and a member of the Executive Committee of the court, and chairs the Eleventh Circuit Pattern Jury Instructions Committee. In 2018, Scriven was elected by her peers in the Eleventh Circuit to serve on the Federal Judges Association Board of Directors and was recently appointed to the Executive Board. In 2012, Scriven was honored for her leadership and excellence by the National Bar Association with the prestigious Gertrude E. Rush Award.

A Georgia native who attend Duke University for undergrad, Scriven chose FSU Law over the University of Florida for smaller class sizes, faculty accessibility and a reputation for strong moot court and legal writing programs.

“My FSU education has served me well throughout my career,” said Scriven. “I have found FSU’s alumni network to be second to none in our legal community. From my first job to the one I hold now, I have found comrades from FSU ready to embrace me and assist me in my work and professional endeavors.”

Since the law school graduated its first class in 1969, more than 25 Black alumni have ascended to the bench. The **Honorable Zebedee Wright ('71)** was FSU Law’s first Black male graduate and became a judge in 1982. The law school’s first Black female graduate, the **Honorable Catherine Brunson ('75)**, also served on the bench from 1994-2018. The **Honorable Emerson Thompson ('73)** retired from the Fifth District Court of Appeal in 2008; the **Honorable Nikki Clark ('77)** retired from the First District Court of Appeal in 2015; the **Honorable Jessica Costello ('09)** was appointed to the Thirteenth Judicial Circuit in 2019; and the **Honorable Anthony Miller** was appointed to the Second Judicial Circuit in 2020.



### Sean A. Pittman

As managing partner and senior attorney at Pittman Law Group, Sean Pittman ('94) is not only a trusted lawyer, but also very involved in Florida's political process. He represents clients before the Florida Cabinet, Florida Legislature, state agencies, and city and county commissions. Pittman counsels a wide variety of clients includ-

ing public entities, small businesses, Fortune 500 companies, private citizens and associations.

"We are a boutique law firm that provides expertise in the areas of government relations, civil litigation, government law, administrative law, education law and more," said Pittman. "I also take pride in my involvement in the local and statewide community through advocacy, serving on boards and volunteering. I love the opportunity to make a difference. Our work is often driven by important issues that impact the lives of everyday people. Our work gives us the opportunity to make laws, change laws, problem solve and have systemic impact on an ever-changing society."

In the weeks leading up to and during legislative session, Pittman can often be found meeting with legislators, consulting with clients and briefing them on pending legislation, monitoring legislative proceedings, and reviewing bills, while still working on his many legal cases. He also co-hosts the television show "The Usual Suspects" and hosts a radio program and podcast, "The Sean Pittman Show," where he analyzes complex issues and interviews local, state and national figures. While COVID-19 has changed the way Pittman and his colleagues work, it has not changed the hectic nature of their jobs during and outside of session. His firm's ability to adapt to evolving situations like the one the world has experienced during COVID-19 has led to much success.

"You have to be proactive and forward thinking," said Pittman. "In the midst of COVID, we made a decision to pivot and diversify our services and hired two new attorneys

With FSU Law located in the capital of Florida, it is no surprise that many alumni cultivate careers in the public policy and government arenas. **Pamela Burch Fort ('77)** is president of The Commerce Group and specializes in legislative and political consulting. **Joe Briggs ('07)** serves as public policy counsel for the NFL Players Association in Washington, D.C. **Shenika "Nik" Harris ('04)** served as Florida's first statewide LGBTQ Consumer Advocate at the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and is now director of strategic outreach and engagement for the Human Rights Campaign. **Kenneth Lawson ('91)** has led the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity, VISIT FLORIDA, and the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation, and now serves as interim executive director of North Carolina Outward Bound School. **G.C. Murray II ('12)**, who is special counsel and director of membership at the Florida Justice Institute, was honored in 2020 as the Young Floridian of the Year for his community service work.

with expertise in education law and civil litigation. We are also venturing into new programming for legal interns. I believe my firm's willingness and ability to adapt and evolve has made us better as we move beyond COVID."

A South Florida native, Pittman also remains engaged in that community. Since 2005, he has been an active member of the prestigious Orange Bowl Committee, where he served as president in 2018-2019. "Prior to my selection for membership on the committee, there had only been two Tallahassee residents elected. Even more rare, I was the first person elected president not from or living in Miami," said Pittman. "Being president of the Orange Bowl Committee was a labor of love. The opportunity to work closely for many years with conference commissioners, university presidents, athletic directors, faculty and student athletes on very important issues within collegiate sports has made me a believer that athletics and the academic enterprise can succeed together."



### Rosalyn “Sia” Baker-Barnes (’00)

Rosalyn “Sia” Baker-Barnes is a shareholder at Searcy Denney Scarola Barnhart & Shipley, P.A. in West Palm Beach. She serves on the firm’s executive committee and specializes in plaintiff’s personal injury law, medical negligence and product liability cases. Among her most notable

cases is her \$20 million jury verdict against R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, a wrongful death case spanning more than 10 years and reaching the U.S. Supreme Court.

“My practice is high intensity, in and out of the courtroom, and I handle cases throughout the state of Florida,” said Baker-Barnes. “Although it is very time consuming, my practice is also very rewarding, as I have the unique opportunity to improve the lives of my clients, most of whom have nowhere else to turn and are in desperate need of help.”

Baker-Barnes has represented many young children who suffered brain injuries due to medical negligence. “These cases take years to prosecute, multiple weeks to try, and are extremely difficult. They are also very rewarding because achieving a successful result can make a real difference in the lives of these families. My clients have received specialized treatment and therapies to maximize their abilities. In some instances, because of that specialized treatment, I have had clients who were told they would never walk or talk, do just that.”

Recently, Baker-Barnes represented the mother of a 19-year-old autistic student who ultimately died due to a lack of school supervision that had been promised by the Palm Beach County School Board. The young man’s father was represented by fellow FSU Law alumna Salesia Smith-Gordon (’92). The case settlement of \$2 million was well above the state sovereign immunity caps. Additionally, the settlement required new training for employees in the Palm Beach school district, named after their client, that could very well save additional lives.

Other Black alumni who have garnered success in traditional legal practice include **Kareem Spratling (’06)**, a shareholder at Bryant Miller Olive who leads the firm’s public finance team and serves on its board of directors; **Earnest DeLoach (’99)**, who is vice president – legal at Balfour Beatty U.S. Southeast Division and also co-leads the company’s national diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives; and **Markenzy LaPointe (’99)**, who is a partner at Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman in Miami, where he co-leads the firm’s product liability practice.

Although she has an extremely demanding practice and is a wife and mother of three children, Baker-Barnes is fully engaged in the legal profession. She was the first African-American female president of the Palm Beach County Bar Association, chaired the Florida Justice Association’s Young Lawyer’s Section and served for four years on The Florida Bar’s Leadership Academy Committee. She now serves on The Florida Bar Board of Governors.

Baker-Barnes has also been active in efforts to combat racial injustices. Last year, she was involved in her firm’s creation of a television public service announcement and social media content denouncing hatred and systemic racism. She also worked with her AKA sorority and local chapter of The Links, Incorporated to increase voter turnout during the 2020 elections. In March 2021, Baker-Barnes received the Florida Anti-Defamation League’s Jurisprudence Award in recognition of her legal career and efforts against racism and discrimination. In April 2021, Baker-Barnes was honored by the Palm County Bar Association with the Judge Edward Rodgers Diversity Award.

### Black Alumni Network

In 2020, alumni Jasmyne Henderson (’15), Salesia Smith-Gordon (’92) and Kareem J. Spratling (’06) founded FSU Law’s Black Alumni Network (BAN) to help Black alumni coalesce resources, connect networks and share ideas in efforts to address the impact of systemic racism on legal education and the legal profession. The group’s mission is to empower and support the Black students, alumni, faculty and staff of the Florida State University College of Law in order to assist those



(L-R) BAN co-founders Salesia Smith-Gordon, Kareem Spratling and Jasmyne Henderson

individuals and the College of Law as a whole in achieving their full potential. Led by Smith-Gordon, who was installed as BAN president in February 2021, the alumni will help with recruiting new students, fundraising and supporting current Black FSU Law community members, among other goals. BAN also is focused on efforts to remove the name from the law school's main classroom building.

"I believe we can do a lot to impact the lives of not just law students, but our alums," said Henderson. "We have such a strong network, but I don't think it's ever been sufficiently leveraged in order to help young lawyers and even older attorneys get business or move their careers." Henderson believes it would have been extremely beneficial for her to interact more with successful Black female attorneys when she was a law student, so she is hoping BAN will help current students see what is possible for them after graduation.

Smith-Gordon and Henderson also want BAN to be a resource for the law school to help foster relationships with potential Black faculty members—to encourage them to join and remain members of the FSU Law community. They also want BAN members to be a resource and knowledge-base for fellow alumni as they navigate their careers.

The Black Alumni Network is open to all graduates of FSU Law, not just the law school's 550-plus Black alumni, and BAN leaders are encouraging everyone to get involved.

"There is a mutual benefit for altruistic reasons," said Smith-Gordon about why alumni should join BAN. "There is also

a benefit from a professional standpoint and from a financial standpoint. My objective is to not add a lot of time or effort to someone's plate; we are tapped out. At some point you are going to need the assistance of others, whether it is ascending to the bench or election or appointment or needing letters written to connect with a partner at a law firm, and there is benefit in having the College of Law behind you. It is mutual because there are many programs of the College of Law for which we can lend our talents of time, even if it is for an hour. Iron sharpens iron and we aim for BAN to serve to enhance FSU College of Law and our profession."

Henderson added, "We are at a time where we are recognizing on a more universal scale some of the impediments to success that people of color have faced. I think that you either want to be a part of the solution or you don't. This is one way that lawyers, specifically, can be a part of the solution in addressing those impediments for law students and lawyers and professors."

The following alumni are serving in BAN leadership roles, thereby lending their talents and time to be part of the solution:

- **Salesia Smith-Gordon ('92)**, president, racial justice consortium co-chair and Florida Bar Board of Governors advisor
- **Conti Smith ('07)**, president-elect
- **Alicia Dixon ('10)**, secretary
- **Kenneth D. Pratt ('99)**, treasurer and fund development
- **Jasmyne Henderson ('15)**, general counsel, governmental affairs co-chair and networking chair
- **Sia Baker-Barnes ('00)**, racial justice consortium co-chair
- **Daynica Harley (3L)**, Black Law Students Association president and student liaison
- **Marlon Hill ('95)**, communications chair and mentorship
- **Hon. Anthony Miller ('00)**, judicial co-chair
- **G.C. Murray II ('12)**, bylaws/corporate governance, membership development and recruitment
- **Sean Pittman ('94)**, governmental affairs co-chair
- **Hon. Stephen Stokes ('91)**, judicial co-chair
- **Glenda Thornton ('89)**, faculty advisor

Alumni can visit [law.fsu.edu/BlackAlumniNetwork](http://law.fsu.edu/BlackAlumniNetwork) to learn more about and join BAN.