



BY APRIL OTTERBERG '06

LESSONS *from the* Inner City

MOST STUDENTS GRADUATING LAW SCHOOL aren't lucky enough to land their dream job. Some don't even know what their dream job would be. But when Chiquisha "Keisha" Robinson '05 joins the ranks of the prestigious Public Defender Service (PDS) in Washington, DC, this fall, she'll count herself among those lucky few—all the more so because of what she overcame to get there.

Robinson grew up in Boston's tough Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan neighborhoods, places publicized more often for the numbers of teens they send to jail than the numbers they graduate from high school. Law school, or even college, wasn't exactly a priority for the majority of her peers.

But Robinson had an advantage she now recognizes isn't all that common. In living with her father from the age of six, three years after her parents divorced, Robinson found unwavering support—and the persistent expectation that she would get an education.

"My dad always instilled in me education. That was paramount," Robinson says. "He made me feel like education was my way out. It wasn't an automatic that because he was educated, I would be all set. I didn't have a trust fund; I didn't have anything to fall back on. I couldn't fall back on him, only my education."

As a high school teacher and athletic coach for Boston Public Schools, Barry Robinson could use his own education as an example for Robinson and her siblings—

< Robinson at the court in Dorchester where she worked as a defender in the Law School's public defender clinic.

**Armed with a law degree,
Keisha Robinson
turns powerlessness
into power**

indeed, he constantly referred to college as the best time of his life—but he also knew his daughter's path to an education wasn't going to be easy. She'd have to pay for college herself, for instance.

"We were poor; we didn't have a lot," Robinson recalls. "All we had was each other. And my mom was struggling [as well]. In spite of that, I was able to get to college."

Robinson funded her bachelor's degree at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst through scholarships, grants, loans, and long hours at multiple part-time jobs. She found her niche at school in political advocacy, such as by working to maintain the university's affirmative action policy.

But she was troubled by a spring break service trip to a poor, rural community in Virginia her sophomore year. The experience left her with a sense of powerlessness—a desire to help poor people, particularly those of color, coupled with the feeling that the problems were too big to tackle. A mentor, Deirdre Royster, a sociology professor at UMass, stepped in and suggested law school.

"Professor Royster said if you really want to make change and you really want to help indigent folks, you need to go to law school... because the law changes every-



JUSTIN ALLARD/VICE KNIGHT

Robinson at graduation: The only thing separating her from her clients, she says, is an education and opportunity.

thing,” Robinson recalls. “It’s the foundation of every major change in this country.”

After arriving at BC Law in the fall of 2002, Robinson studied the law with the growing recognition of how easily her life could have turned out differently. Beginning with a summer position after her first year with the housing unit of Greater Boston Legal Services, she also discerned how her background meant she could easily understand some of the issues her clients were facing—even if they initially were surprised to be dealing with an African-American woman from their neighborhood.

“To come from these same communities and be able to help them with their [legal issues] was great for me,” Robinson says. “And I think they shared so much more with me and opened up so much more to me...specifically because I could relate.”

Encouraged by her father to value education and prodded by her mother to remember that getting an education didn’t make her better than anyone else, Robinson believes that in reality, very little stands between her and the clients she’s advised as a Boston College Defender in the Law School’s public defender clinic.

“The only thing that separates me from my clients is an education and an opportunity. That’s it,” Robinson says. “I look like you, and I come from the same neighborhoods you come from. I just was blessed with my dad who raised me and who I owe basically everything to.”

That kind of attitude means Robinson takes on her clients’ battles as if they were her own. It’s also the attitude she believes helps

“I just BELIEVE
that individual people
make differences
in individuals’ lives.”

make DC’s Public Defender Service the country’s model public defender office—and an office where her advocacy style will be welcomed. “They don’t see themselves separate from their client, which is the main thing that draws me to them,” Robinson says.

Although the PDS interview process was rigorous and highly competitive (the office receives more than 600 applications for a handful of staff attorney positions each year), Robinson felt well prepared. Thanks to her experience in BC Law’s clinic, she was committed to becoming a public defender. That experience offered Robinson another mentor: Professor Sharon Beckman, who advises the clinic students.

Beckman believes Robinson will be a good fit for PDS because her background means she possesses a unique, valuable skill set. “Because it can hire only a limited number of new attorneys, [PDS] wants to be sure it’s hiring [not just] those with the very best academics, but also those who will be fearless in standing up for clients generally seen as unpopular and those who have the personal skills to understand their clients,” Beckman explains. “...What [Robinson] brings to the job ... is her whole life experience and background, which taught her no one achieves the pinnacle of success without help—and that we should be careful about judging people [with criminal backgrounds].”

Beckman recalled an instance during clinic when Robinson got her client’s case dismissed—an unusual result—by doing her homework on the facts in the police report and by continuing to advocate for her client until the assistant district attorney agreed he lacked the evidence to prosecute. That kind of dedication to public service is the reason Robinson was the 2005 recipient of BC Law’s Drinan Family Fund Award, which will provide \$10,000 a year for two years in loan repayment assistance.

She’s a fearless advocate; she’s not afraid or intimidated,” Beckman observes. “She’s also developed quite a bit of credibility with the [assistant district attorneys]. She treats everybody with respect, and as a result, everyone in the courthouse respects her.”

Robinson realized she wanted to be a public defender soon into the beginning of her third year of law school. After a stint as a summer associate at Hinman, Howard, & Kattell, LLP, in upstate New York, she began the fall of her third year counseling and advocating for clients in BC Law’s clinic.

“I learned a lot ... in [the] firm, but it wasn’t until I did criminal law issues that I felt the passion again,” Robinson says. “I used to

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Talking Points Memo website, Harvard Law School professor Elizabeth Warren offers this analysis of credit card issuers' economics:

"Much larger [than the cost of writing off bad debts] is the cost of funds, which is the amount [that credit card issuers] must pay to borrow the money they lend out. From 1980 to 1992, that cost fell from 13.4 percent to 3.5 percent, a stunning decrease.... In the same time period, the average credit card interest rate rose from 17.3 percent to 17.8 percent.... When the cost of funds dropped nine times in 2001, instead of passing along the cost savings, the credit card companies pocketed a windfall of \$10 billion in a single year."

Ingrid Hillinger shares Warren's skepticism about the promised savings to credit card holders. She says, "You want to place a bet that credit card interest rates will go down? Let's just watch."

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run track [as] a sprinter. In passing someone on the curve, I would get a high—that's the high I get doing criminal law. That's the high I get practicing in court. That's the high I get when I'm advocating on behalf of my clients."

Robinson's position with PDS certainly will give her numerous opportunities to pursue her passion. With more than 200 employees handling several thousand cases a year, PDS is an office nationally known for providing clients not only with strong criminal defenses, but also with services addressing a variety of clients' social and economic needs, made possible by the office's federal funding. Such broad-based representation helps make staff attorney positions with PDS perhaps the most sought-after public defender jobs in the country.

Some of Robinson's competitive advantage may derive from the discipline she developed as a youngster. She remembers her father giving her a mountain of books to read during her childhood. Until she turned thirteen, she was expected to write a book report for each book that wasn't primarily pleasure reading. Her father's goal, she says, was to get her writing and to help

her to read the books thoroughly because she knew she'd have to put her thoughts down on paper.

Her mother, Kristin Mims, provided support in a different way during Robinson's frequent visits. When she could, she gave her daughter simple treats and rewards. "My mom was kind of the 'cool parent.' She was the one that bought the cool clothes—things like that to balance out my dad's strictness. My dad was strict, but also a lot of fun. She helped me with material things that my dad didn't necessarily see as important."

Robinson believes that her extended family and the black community also wanted her to succeed. Now she looks upon her success as a chance to inspire others—particularly her three brothers and two sisters—to graduate from college as well.

Robinson wants to use her success and education to help others, she says, because she believes she needs her clients just as much as they need her.

"My friends and my family members are just like them, and I'm just like them. I simply possess tools that they don't have," Robinson explains. "I need them because it keeps me humble; it keeps me grounded. It makes me happy for them to respect me because I'm an attorney and [for] what I can do for them, but [also] to respect me even more because I can relate to them and don't judge them."

At the same time, Robinson understands that investing so personally in her clients can take an emotional toll, particularly because the stakes in criminal defense work are so high. What Robinson believes will sustain her, however, is her desire to give clients hope—to be that person, like her father and others have been to her, who encourages and believes in the client's potential. In that sense, despite the challenges that lie ahead, particularly those frustrations she already perceives with how the criminal justice system functions, she says being a public defender for PDS is very much her dream job.

"I just believe that individual people make differences in individuals' lives," Robinson observes. "I know that my dad's belief that I could go anywhere in this world makes me believe it. I know the fact that Professor Beckman pushes me so far makes me feel like I can and I could work at PDS. I feel like [because] I care about my clients, they'll become better citizens—not all hundreds of them, but one or two. That sounds very cliché and romanticized, but it's true, because I'm a recipient of it."

Scholar's Forum

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avenge Hamlet's father's death. It may also be why, as an exception to the hearsay rule, courts admit into evidence dying declarations. The logic is theologic: No one would die with a lie on his/her lips, as it would forfeit salvation of the soul.

This religious understanding of the meaning and importance of final utterances is the apparent source of the last words ritual in the execution protocol, dating to when executions were public events. Intended as a communal lesson, executions attracted large audiences and the condemned's last words served as the climax of the execution drama. Especially important in theocratic times, executions had an obvious providential meaning and were a superb evangelical vehicle. Prominent clerics sermonized on capital cases, spiritually guided the prisoner to confession and repentance as the execution approached, joined the prisoner's cortege on the walk to the gallows, preached there to the assembled masses, and encouraged the condemned to voice the last words of a penitent that they might serve as a lesson to others. These lessons had a broader audience once published. One of the first known publications to exemplify them was a widely circulated account by Giuseppe Blondo, a Jesuit priest, of the last hours of a deeply remorseful criminal, executed in Rome in 1592, who died with exemplary piety and humility.

When executions moved behind prison walls and away from large public audiences, the practice of providing the condemned a chance to speak did not change. The endurance of the last words ritual even now suggests that religiously inspired views of the connection between last words and personal salvation continue to have cultural resonance. In 1998, when the state of Ohio proposed a new execution protocol that eliminated the last words opportunity, death row inmates sued to obtain it and were successful in doing so. One interpretation of the outcome of this lawsuit is that while the state has the authority to take life, it does not have the authority to take the afterlife.

Whether it is attributable to religious beliefs about the path to the hereafter, cultural expectations, human nature, or some other source, most condemned persons across countries and centuries, when faced with that unimaginable choice to