

LSHV Celebrates Black History with an Interview with our First African-American CPO

Jill Bradshaw-Soto became the first African-American Chief Program Officer of Legal Services of the Hudson Valley (LSHV) in 2021. Jill will be celebrating her 25th anniversary with LSHV this coming March. Get to know more about Jill, her journey at LSHV and her experience as a Black Lawyer.

Tell me where you are from.

I spent my entire childhood in Port Chester, NY and I also lived in the Bronx for awhile as a young adult. The Bronx was quite different than where I grew up. It had an energy, never quiet and there were always people out. It had an exciting vibe to it.

When did you decide you wanted to be a lawyer?

I never knew a time when I didn't want to be a lawyer, I just always did. Growing up, my family and teachers would say "Jill is smart but she talks too much". So, it was kind of a logical progression from who I was.



What was your biggest inspiration growing up?

I grew up around incredibly strong women. My grandmother was like this matriarch that really ruled and was a queen, for sure. She was one of my biggest influences and inspirations in life. My mom and her sisters, all of whom were queens in their own right, set the example for me to follow. They were regal in how they presented themselves to the world and there was no mistaking that characteristic. Their strength, intelligence and beauty set the standard for me at a very young age.

Where did you go to college?

I attended Guilford College in North Carolina. Guilford College was part of the Underground Railroad. There is still a section of the campus that has wooded areas where it was safe for slaves to go through. I received my law degree from Cardozo in New York City, which is a primarily Jewish institution. Attending Cardozo exposed me to activism. I participated in protests regarding the lack of diversity and not having any Black Professors. I had the opportunity to work with Anti-Apartheid Organizations in New York City and be a part of the effort to divest in South Africa.

Why are you so passionate about community outreach?

One of my She-roses is Harriet Tubman. What I admire most about her is her courage and unselfishness. She could have just lived her life as a free person, but she chose to go back and help others. She had the option to stay in safety and she chose danger when she did not have to. Because of Harriet Tubman's example, I realized early on that I have a responsibility to reach back and help others too! I have a mindset that we must empower each other, and I get that chance representing clients. It's part of my mission, but it's not enough. We have to equip our people to stand up for themselves. Working at LSHV allows me to do just that - if you teach someone to speak up for themselves, you give them tools that translate to empowerment, which is what changes lives.





What does Black History Month mean to you?

I feel like we're so much bigger than that month. It's great that things get highlighted, but we're just so much more than that. I think that we have a responsibility to our community. No matter how high up you get, no matter how much money you make, you have the responsibility to reach back and be like Harriet Tubman. It is our responsibility to reach back and make sure those behind us can see our light and have access to our light. So Black History is so much more than the shortest month of the year.

What challenges did you face, are facing?

There were many challenges I faced as an African-American woman. I read this article once about racial trauma, and I realized that I have experienced it. In my history, I've been called the 'N' word, I saw the KKK marching in a parade by my college, I've been mistaken as the client in the courtroom on many occasions, even though I was dressed professionally in a suit.

After law school getting a job was really difficult. I've been the first or the only black person in the room on many occasions. I've developed a tough skin over time but there were definitely some tears cried on the journey. However, I realized my biggest challenge was me. I made the decision that no one would define who I was going to be, except me. I'm now in a new arena where I'm not always comfortable, but I remind myself that I worked hard to get here and I deserve to be here.

What advice would you give to a new lawyer?

Be prepared to do the work; preparation is the key. You must work on yourself to have confidence. There will be times you will be in rooms and asked improper questions, or treated in a way to make you feel invisible. If you don't know who you are, and you haven't done the work to be okay with you, then all of that could really break you down. But what you learn from those moments is - ***They will define you, if you don't define you.***

Do you believe a more diverse workplace affects the clients and the population we serve?

Oh, like 100,00 times YES! There's nothing like going into a law office and seeing yourself. I've had many, many clients, especially older black people come in, and when they see you, they give you that smile that we all know means, hi. There is nothing like walking into a professional environment and seeing people who look like you.

Having a diverse staff in the type of work we do, enhances the services we provide to our clients. It makes us part of the community and allows us to relate to our clients from their perspective. It's important to have diverse viewpoints on all kinds of topics from direct services to grants. It's important in every aspect of what we do.

