

## Access to Justice Is a Right, Not a Privilege

By || **BRANDON VAUGHN**

When people hear that nearly everyone in my immediate family is a lawyer—including my dad and two siblings—what usually follows is, “Thanksgiving dinners must be interesting. I can only imagine all the heated debates with a house full of lawyers.” I often laugh and reply that we seldom debate or argue. And if we do, my mother, who is the only nonlawyer, often “wins” the arguments, leaving us amused and humbled. This unique family dynamic has shaped my journey as a Black attorney and my commitment to advocating for accessible justice.

My path was illuminated by the legal legacy of my family. But this privilege also came with an acute awareness of the disparities in the justice system, especially for Black individuals. My experiences, both in college and as a lawyer, have been stark reminders of these inequities.

In college, a prank escalated unexpectedly: During “prank week” on our dorm floor, a roommate left his room unlocked while taking a shower, and, as a joke, I took his PlayStation and locked it in my closet. The roommate assumed the PlayStation had been stolen and called the university police. When the police arrived to do their “investigation,” I immediately shared that I had the PlayStation locked in my closet and would return it to my roommate. Without any further discussion, I found myself handcuffed and charged with felony burglary.

After a night in the county jail, my father was able to work with the administration at the university and the county attorney’s office to get the case dismissed and ultimately expunged from my record. If not for my father’s legal expertise and connections, the outcome of that night could have been drastically different. This incident was an early lesson in how swiftly situations

can turn dire for Black individuals, even over misunderstandings.

Years later, as an established lawyer, another incident like this highlighted this reality again. After attending a Legal Aid fundraiser in Minneapolis, a bouncer at a bar refused to admit my of-age brother, who is also a lawyer, because he claimed my brother’s out-of-state license was a fake ID. After a short argument, our group, which included people of all races, left the bar. We were about a block away when we saw multiple police squad cars driving with sirens on and thought nothing of it. But as we were walking to the next bar, all the Black male members of our group were tackled, pepper sprayed, handcuffed, and then thrown in the back of police cars.

Law enforcement didn’t ask us to stop to speak to them or even really identify themselves or explain why they were detaining us until after the fact. Even with our status as attorneys, we were not immune to racial profiling and harsh treatment. Ultimately, we learned that the bouncer claimed he was assaulted by our group and led the police to believe that violent attackers were fleeing the bar, all of which was untrue. The officers involved didn’t arrest us for any crimes or apologize for their actions. They simply told us to have a good night and proceeded with the evening as though nothing happened.


These experiences, juxtaposed against the backdrop of my privileged upbringing, reinforced my dedication to ensuring future generations have equitable access to the law. It’s not just about legal representation; it’s about changing the narrative and challenging the systemic biases that continue to plague our society.

As legal professionals, we bear a responsibility that extends beyond the courtroom. We are guardians of justice

tasked with empathy and compassion. It’s imperative that we recognize our privileges and strive to understand those with different life experiences. In doing so, we can contribute significantly to individual lives and societal progress.

Each of us has a role to play in this fight for justice. This begins with commitments like the AAJ Member Firm Pledge to Act, which aims to promote the recruitment, retention, and promotion of minority attorneys.<sup>1</sup> We must also engage in mentoring and actively seek to understand those who are different from us by focusing on our common humanity.

Throughout my 15-year career, I’ve been recognized with accolades from prestigious organizations for my legal skills and community involvement. While I appreciate these honors, they don’t erase the reality that I practice in a city still reeling from the murder of George Floyd. Such events are a constant reminder of the risks that Black individuals face—risks unfamiliar to many of my white colleagues.

Rather than basking in these accolades, I choose to lead, mentor, and speak out. My experiences, both privileged and challenging, have instilled a sense of duty in me. I urge you to join me in leveraging your privilege to create a more just and equitable society. Let’s work together to ensure that access to justice is not a privilege but a right for all. 



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### NOTE

1. Learn more at <https://www.justice.org/community/pledge-to-act>.