

Meet Zoë Harris, a Student Driven to Succeed



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WILLIAM H. BOWEN
SCHOOL OF LAW

Zoë Harris, a second-year student at Bowen, came to her interview with her two-year-old half-sister asleep in her arms. Zoë had just driven back from her bi-weekly trip to Illinois, where she visited her father who is recovering from a two-month long hospital stay due to COVID complications. She brought her half-siblings with her so that they could visit her younger brother, of whom Zoë has temporary custody. She was planning on returning to Peoria, Illinois two days later to celebrate her father's release from the hospital.

That tells you a lot about Zoë and what drives her to succeed. She is as committed to her family as she is to her law school studies.

After growing up in Camden, Arkansas, Zoë attended college at UA Little Rock and earned her undergraduate degree in criminal justice. She was the first person in her family to graduate from college. It was all part of her goal to attend law school, and she set that goal for a very specific reason.

“When I was eight years old, my brother—who was twelve at the time—was incarcerated and sentenced to twenty years,” she explained. “I was determined to become an attorney and get him out of jail. Not that I thought I would be the one to save him. I wanted the tools to investigate his case and the network to find him an excellent attorney.”

Her determination led her to finishing both high school and her undergraduate studies a year early. When she applied to Bowen, she hit an LSAT-sized roadblock. “I took the test twice, and my scores weren't great,” she said. “It was incredibly humbling.”

Based on the strength of the rest of her application, Zoë was offered a chance to enroll in Bowen's LEAP program. LEAP, which stands for Legal Education Advancement Program, is designed to assist dedicated students who have the teamwork, leadership, drive, and academic skills necessary to complete law school and pass the bar exam. This six-week, immersive, summer program requires a full-time commitment.

“Bowen offered me the opportunity to prove I belonged here, and I'm very proud of being a student in the program,” Zoë said. “I've worked hard to continue proving I belong here every day.”

The LEAP program required that Zoë begin law school as a part-time student in Bowen's evening division. As soon as she had the opportunity, she switched to the full-time/day division. She didn't have time for a four-year program while her brother remained locked away.

"He was in a hell-hole and it was becoming more and more of a necessity that we get him out. Everyone knows Illinois' prison facilities are not the most pleasant."

As a first-year student, Zoë participated in Bowen's Student Success Program. She and her fellow team members met regularly with a dean's fellow. This upper-level student developed lesson plans on topics including goal setting, case briefing, outlining, study skills, stress management, and test-taking strategies. Zoë's dean's fellow was Kishma Francis.

"When you come into law school, you are a chicken with its head cut off. Once you step foot on this campus, you have entered a whole new world. You know nothing, and without a good guide you don't get better," Zoë said. "I was that student. There were a lot of things I didn't know. Kishma was a great guide, and I wanted to be that person for someone else."

That desire led Zoë to become a dean's fellow herself in 2020. Due to her dedication and her group's successes, she was selected as Dean's Fellow of the Year.

She told her students to be humble. "So many students were at the top of their class as an undergraduate, but law school is full of people who were at the top of their class. If you aren't humble enough to learn, to be open to criticism and feedback, you don't grow."

That's one of the lessons Zoë carried into her first year Criminal Law class with Professor Terrence Cain. It's been her favorite class at Bowen so far. Not only is the subject her life-long passion, she also appreciated what Professor Cain taught her in and outside of the classroom. "He has a genuine interest in his students' success."

In addition to her classes and dean's fellow duties, Zoë is advocating for criminal justice reform. After a clerkship at the Pulaski County Prosecutor's Office, she began working with decARcerate, an Arkansas non-profit dedicated to reforming the Arkansas prison system and to rehabilitating those who have been released. The goal is to prevent recidivism. Zoë is working on legislative research and creating talking points regarding unjust sentences and unconstitutionality.

She is also working with Abolish Private Prisons ("APP") related to their nationwide work to end for-profit private prisons in the United States. She is conducting research in support of that mission and assisting with the first class action APP has filed in the US District Court for the District of Arizona. She works closely with Bowen professor andré douglas pond cummings, who is APP's president.

There are three members of Bowen's faculty who tie as Zoë's favorite professors. "It really is a tie," she laughed. "I respect all three of them greatly. In some way, they have all significantly added to my experience here at Bowen."

She goes on to explain their individual impacts. "Professor Cain, through his tough love tactics, makes it abundantly clear that a mediocre student is a mediocre attorney which makes for mediocre success, if you could call it success at all. Professor cummings not only made contracts surprisingly enjoyable, but he makes a point to ensure his students' interests are always taken into consideration. Professor Boles is an absolute angel. Whether she knows it or not, she has been an incredible mentor for me during my time here at Bowen."

She also points to cummings' and Boles' dedication to her as an APP employee. "I had a family emergency and needed to get home, but I hadn't received a paycheck yet. Professors cummings and Boles worked hard to make sure I could travel to help my family."

On the personal side, Zoë is engaged to

be married. She and her fiancée, Autumn Jackson, travel frequently and spend as much time as they can with their families. "My fiancée has been with me since the beginning of this journey, but we agreed early on that we would conquer one thing at a time. We'll get married after I graduate."

A fun fact about Zoë is that she horseback rides and has done so since before she was born..

"My mom was a barrel racer, and she also trained horses. According to my dad, my mother was on top of a horse until she was 8 months pregnant with me. According to my mom, it was only 6 months. Although law school has taken away a lot of my free time to ride, I'll get back my rhythm after I pass the bar."

Once she's out of law school, Zoë plans to pursue criminal law as a career. Her brother was released from prison early, but there are many more people who need her help.

"There are so many people of color who are ignorant of their rights," she said. "They need people who not only will teach them how things work, but will also protect them and speak on their behalf. I want to be that person. This might sound cliché, but I want to be a voice for the voiceless."

At the end of this academic year full of highs, lows, and a pandemic, Zoë has one final word for future law students.

"There will always be something the devil throws your way. Do not sulk, do not make excuses, and do not marinate in your self-pity. Most importantly do not become discouraged," she says. "Whether it's your MacBook going out and you have no Apple Care or a parent with a serious illness, focus on your goals and do not become a victim of your circumstances. Be present and attentive and stay on track. You cannot afford to do otherwise."