



Meet Jemima Merritt

First-year law student Jemima Merritt, who grew up in Little Rock, is determined to become a criminal defense attorney.

“I have had an interest in law for as long as I can remember,” Merritt said. “I have always had my heart set on advocating for my community by becoming a criminal defense attorney.”

Although Merritt’s first semester of law school was fraught with COVID-19-related difficulties, her determination has not wavered. Last August, she donned her personal protective equipment, dug in her heels, and began the journey toward becoming a lawyer and an advocate.

“I picked up on the joke from my family about me being so argumentative,” Merritt said. “They said I should be a lawyer and after hearing it so much, I decided I would be. After researching what exactly a lawyer was and what they did, I joined a debate team, and my interest was piqued. I made my final decision.” Law school was the next step in a carefully laid plan that began in Merritt’s eighth grade year.

After graduating from Little Rock Central High School in 2016, Merritt enrolled at Clark Atlanta University, one of the country’s 101 remaining Historic Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) that were established before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Clark Atlanta University was created in 1988



Whichever community Merritt selects as her permanent home, it will benefit from her passion for the law and from her life experience.

when Atlanta University and Clark College, both founded in the 1860s, were consolidated. The schools were among the first institutions to award degrees to African American students. Merritt graduated in May of 2020 with a Bachelor of Arts in political science. She was on the dean’s list and received an Outstanding Academic Achievement Award. Merritt also volunteered for a political campaign, and was a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Sigma Alpha Pi, and the Clark Atlanta University Pre-Law Society.

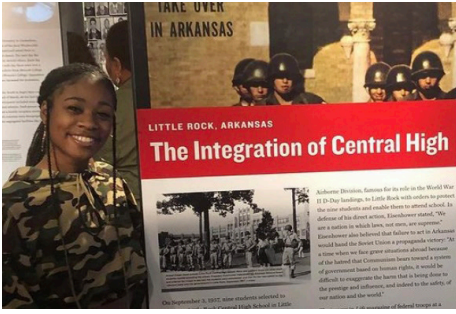
After completing her undergraduate degree, attending the University of Arkansas School of Law was a logical choice for Merritt.

“I chose the University of Arkansas because it was closer to my family and because of all of the good things I heard about the school and its professors,” Merritt said. “People talked highly of the school and I knew I would have a great experience learning from some of the best law professors in the state.”

As Merritt reflects on her first semester of law school, she admits it was more challenging than she expected. Not surprisingly, Criminal Law, taught by Laurent Sacharoff, professor of law and associate dean for research and faculty development, was her favorite class.

Commenting on Merritt’s commitment in class, professor Sacharoff said, “Jemima’s strong interest in criminal law really came across.” The remark is impressive as it comes at a time when the entire campus community is struggling to get to know each other due to social distancing (attending class in person every-other meeting day) and wearing PPE.

Scholarship support has already assisted Merritt in realizing her professional dream. She is the inaugural recipient of the Boone, Johnson, Neely and Wilson Legal Opportunity Scholarship, created through the generosity of School of Law alumni



Cornelius and Tea' Boone, Greneda Johnson, Efrem Neely, and Angela Wilson. The group wants to encourage and facilitate diverse students in choosing law as a profession.

Whichever community Merritt selects as her permanent home, it will benefit from her passion for the law and from her life experience. Presently, she plans to return to Atlanta to advocate for her community. She worked her way through undergraduate school by holding a series of customer-oriented retail jobs, including a stint in a grocery store during her senior year. She knew her community and assisted customers

with the myriad of challenges they faced in their day-to-day life.

When asked about attending Little Rock Central High School, Merritt's appreciation of the school and its history is apparent.

"Everyone who attends Central knows its rich history. Fortunately, the administrators and faculty are adamant about preserving it. Today, Central is one of the most, if not the most, diverse high schools in Little Rock. I met someone new, someone from a different background, almost every day I went to the school, which was truly amazing. I had a friend who had moved to Little Rock, with her family, from Mexico, and another who was an exchange student from Korea."

Merritt also speaks fondly of the school's traditions and the excellence of its teachers. She remembers proudly wearing Tiger black and gold, the school colors, on the first day of her senior year. She enjoys looking through

decades-old yearbooks containing photos of students proudly wearing the colors on the first day of their senior years.

"Aside from the fact that the school has great teachers, and you get a great education, you also get an amazing experience while attending the school. You leave feeling like you were a part of history. I feel like I made history by graduating from Central High."