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## **Suffolk University Law School Student Johanna Merlos Receives Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. Scholarship from Massachusetts Bar Association**

*Future public defender recognized for commitment to marginalized communities*

BOSTON, Mass. — The Massachusetts Bar Association presented its Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. Scholarship to Suffolk University Law School student Johanna Merlos at the 2024 MBA Annual Dinner on May 2 at the Westin Boston Seaport District. The \$10,000 scholarship is awarded to a third-year student at a Massachusetts law school who is committed to providing legal assistance to underrepresented individuals and communities in Massachusetts upon graduating.

During her law school career, Merlos has defended prisoners in disciplinary hearings with Harvard's Prison Legal Assistance Project, worked with unaccompanied refugee minors at Kids in Need of Defense, and assisted in post-conviction matters with the New England Innocence Project. She has most recently served as a Rule 3:03 student attorney with the Suffolk Defenders, representing clients charged with misdemeanors in Boston Municipal Court.

Merlos' professional experiences as a law student reflect a long-held commitment to advocating for members of marginalized communities that dates back to her upbringing in the New York City housing projects and motivated her to pursue a legal education. She previously spent four years as a history teacher in Worcester, where she developed the first dual-language curriculum for middle school students and created a new course focused on U.S. colonization and the Latinx experience.

In addition to her practical work while in law school, Merlos has been a member of the Latin American Law Students Association, a student ambassador and Progress to Success mentor, and a member of the Jessup International Law Moot Court Team. She received the Distinguished Oral Advocate Award in her first-year Legal Practice Skills class and recently won the Goodwin Trial Competition in a criminal case exploring manslaughter and criminal liability for harm done by pets.

Merlos will remain a strong voice for underserved individuals when she enters the workforce as a trial attorney in the Public Defender Division of the Committee for Public Counsel Services. While fulfilling her role as a public defender, she also hopes to help advocate for a more holistic system of justice that addresses the underlying causes of criminality.

“Johanna’s sense of service to vulnerable communities and her dedication to pursuing systemic change in the legal field will be to the great benefit of our profession as she joins the ranks of practicing attorneys in Massachusetts,” said MBA President-elect Victoria M. Santoro, who serves on the Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. Scholarship Committee. “We are proud to recognize her many law school achievements and look forward to watching her realize her promise as a public defender.”

*Incorporated in 1911, the Massachusetts Bar Association is a non-profit organization that serves the legal profession and the public by promoting the administration of justice, legal education, professional excellence and respect for the law. The MBA represents a diverse group of attorneys, judges and legal professionals across the commonwealth.*