

# Northeastern Law

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## FOUR SCORE

Northeastern Law graduates are shaking things up in Massachusetts



Northeastern Law graduates are helping to build a more diverse justice system in a four-pronged mentoring program that engages lawyers with students in high school, college and law school.

**BY ELAINE McARDLE**

# Ground

**FROM THE**

# UP

Photographs by **Kathleen Doohar**

A portrait of Judge Angela Ordoñez, a woman with wavy grey hair, wearing a black judicial robe with a blue patterned scarf. She is standing in a courtroom with wooden benches and large windows in the background. The lighting is soft and natural, coming from the windows.

JUDGE ANGELA  
ORDOÑEZ '89  
served as assistant  
register of probate  
in the Suffolk  
Probate and Family  
Court before her  
appointment to the  
bench in 2000.



## S A PRESCHOOLER, JUDGE ANGELA ORDOÑEZ '89,

raised by her single mother and grandmother — both immigrants from Colombia — taught herself English by watching TV. A few years later, after seeing the movie “And Justice for All,” she was eager to become a lawyer but had no idea how to get there.

Loren Forbes was a second-year student at Roxbury Community College in Boston with no particular career track in mind. When Carol Liebman '89, a criminal justice professor and department coordinator who taught his constitutional law class, invited him to join a mentoring program that introduces students to law and law-adjacent careers, he figured, why not?

“It was great,” says Forbes, who was inspired by his mentors to become a lawyer. Forbes got so much out of it that he stayed in the program for six years, including two more years as an undergraduate — he graduated *summa cum laude* from UMass Boston — and three years as a student at Suffolk Law School. Today, he is a staff attorney with Greater Boston Legal Services, where he handles housing law and eviction defense. “It was helpful because it opened me up to a new world of law,” continues Forbes, who is the first lawyer in his family. “Speaking to attorneys made the idea of being an attorney very attainable, and it does the same for others who want to do forensic science or law enforcement. It opens up avenues for kids who may not otherwise have those avenues open to them.”

### OPENING DOORS

“There’s an old saying, ‘Necessity is the mother of invention.’ I built what I wish I’d had as a teenager, a way to learn things to help guide your career,” says Ordoñez, an associate justice sitting in the Barnstable Probate and Family Court in Massachusetts and former chief justice of the Massachusetts Probate and Family Court Department. Her path to a legal career also hinged on a mentor: When she learned that her high school English teacher’s husband was a lawyer, she asked for his help. He guided her through the process, including helping her get a volunteer job in the Natick

District Court probation department. “From then on, it was me and the trial courts throughout the years,” she says.

Ordoñez is the first to point out that without that stroke of luck, her life might have turned out very differently. To ensure other young people have more opportunities and mentorship than she did — especially those with little access to the legal world — she created the award-winning Massachusetts Bar Association (MBA) Tiered Community Mentoring Program (TCM) in 2009. TCM, explains Liebman (who is also Ordoñez’s spouse), was designed to expose students — especially those from historically marginalized communities — to career choices in the justice profession. Working in teams of four — each includes a high school student, a college student, a law student and an attorney mentor — they meet judges, lawyers, clerks, probation officers, court officers, police officers, FBI agents, federal marshals, interpreters and others. The teams get together throughout the academic year and also join other teams for bigger events, including a networking event, trivia night and workshops.

Fourteen years later, TCM is thriving in two cities: Boston and Worcester. Each year, there are approximately 10, four-person teams in each city. A number of law schools participate — Northeastern, Suffolk, Boston University and Western New England — as well as colleges and high schools in the Boston and Worcester areas. A majority of the students are from the BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+ communities, Ordoñez explains, and the program has twice received awards from the American Bar Association for its commitment to diversity.

“It’s meant to open doors for folks who really didn’t have the kinds of opportunities other folks have had,” adds Quaime Lee '02, assistant dean for co-op and career development at Northeastern Law, who became involved with the program when he worked in the career office at Suffolk Law. For five years at Suffolk and now at Northeastern since 2021, Lee has worked with area law schools to recruit law students for the program, plan events and select candidates. “It’s also a chance for law students to give back to the Boston community by mentoring a college and high school student.”

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—Loren Forbes



LOREN FORBES  
is a staff attorney  
with Greater Boston  
Legal Services.

**GEOFFREY SPOFFORD '89**  
was honored in 2019 with  
the Massachusetts Bar  
Association's Community  
Service Award.



## WESTWARD EXPANSION

When Ordoñez approached Geoffrey Spofford '89 about launching a Worcester branch of the program in 2016, he was enthusiastic. A partner with Lian Zarrow, Spofford is a former president of the Worcester Bar Association.

"We've never been a program trying to show people what the path is to become a lawyer or what kind of lawyer to become," says Spofford, who now co-chairs TCM with Ordoñez. "We are trying to expose people to what you can do within the legal community."

TCM holds five or six events each year, including a popular speed networking event that gives students the chance to talk in small groups with judges, lawyers, FBI agents, court officials and others. The teams visit court-houses to talk not only with judges but also probation officers, clerks and interpreters. One year, the Worcester teams focused on the opioid epidemic and toured the Worcester House of Correction, which has a program for inmates recovering from substance use disorder. In between these types of events, the four-person teams meet to deepen the mentoring experience. Since 2020, due to the pandemic, the program has been virtual — yet it continues to thrive. In 2021, it launched a paid internship program within the Massachusetts trial courts for high school, college and law students — it was so successful that it was expanded from five to nine students in 2022.

The mentoring program is so popular among lawyers that some teams this year have two lawyer mentors. Spofford, who serves on Northeastern Law's Alumni/ae Association board of directors, recently recruited three other board members to join the mentoring program: Lennox Chase '98, founder of Chase Legal Services; Michelle De Oliveira '12, a partner with Kenney & Sams; and Andrea (Evans) Zoia '12, a partner with Morgan, Brown & Joy. "For the attorney mentors, they really feel they get as much as they give, this joy of helping a young person develop, to be able to guide them, just to be a sounding board whenever they need it," says Ordoñez.

"I think in many respects, everyone is mentoring everyone," says Spofford. "The high school student may come in much more technologically adept so the lawyer may pick up on something from the student. The student may be struggling with issues in school that the lawyer didn't know existed. Every lawyer I know who has been a mentor has spoken about what they get out of it."

That's certainly true of Amanda Zuretti '98, who's in her second year as a lawyer mentor in Worcester. Zuretti, who practices real estate law with Bowditch, says, "Those of us who've been working professionals have a chance to listen to those just beginning their journey, and they have a safe place to ask questions: 'How did you get where you are now? What do you have to do? Is it really possible?'"

Zuretti notes that there is significant diversity among the participants, including race, gender identity, age and educational experience. "The primary focus is to encourage students of color in high school and college to consider the law but also — and here's the key part — to feel a sense of belongingness to the profession," she says.

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—Geoffrey Spofford '89

"If we really want to change the complexion of our legal landscape in terms of who is participating and how they are participating and the power they have to participate, it starts not just with law students but engaging law students to help those coming after them — the high school and college students — so we are building multi-generational change," says Lee, who notes that students of color are increasingly interested in law firm careers. Last summer, a record 56 Northeastern Law students worked as summer associates; of those, 55 percent identified as BIPOC.

## NORTHEASTERN NEXUS

The program has many Northeastern Law connections. In addition to Ordoñez's spouse, Liebman, whom she met in law school, Spofford's wife, Juliana Spofford '89, whom he met at Northeastern, is also involved. She is general counsel and chief privacy officer at Aidentified, a data services and technology start-up. Gina Plata-Nino '12, who is deputy director of SNAP at the Food Research and Action Center, a national organization based in Washington, DC, was a law student in the program at Northeastern and then a lawyer mentor in Boston. She helped Spofford launch the Worcester program. Ordoñez and Spofford also praise the MBA as an exceptional partner, including the support of MBA presidents and the ongoing help of Elizabeth O'Neil, the MBA director of community and public services, who helps administer the program.

At the program's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 2019, the keynote speaker was Rachael Rollins '97, then Suffolk County district attorney and now US attorney for the District of Massachusetts. Massachusetts Governor Maura Healey '98 spoke at program events during her years as the commonwealth's attorney general. And last year's keynote speaker for a December event was the Honorable Donald Cabell '91, a magistrate judge with the US District Court in Massachusetts.

Once someone completes the program, the idea is that they will pay it forward by becoming a mentor themselves, Ordoñez says. Forbes was on the board of the program and was instrumental in launching its alumni program to encourage those who've been through it to remain involved. "Our goal is for the relationships to carry on, not that it's one and done but that it continues and creates long-term relationships," notes O'Neil.

"Everyone is a success story because we are providing connection," says Ordoñez. "I always say that the goal was not for every high school or college student to become a lawyer but to be introduced to the legal system and criminal justice, the law environment, to learn more and hear from people in it and connect with them. We don't have enough diversity on the bench, so my long-term goal is to make sure we have more people of color in the legal profession and in the court system because we need to represent who we serve."

*Elaine McArdle, based in Saratoga Springs, New York, is a contributing writer.*