

FEATURE



Fred Abramson's ENDURING VISION OF ACCESS TO EDUCATION

By Elizabeth Sarah "Sally" Gere and Myles V. Lynk

From growing up in the "rough section" of Harlem, as he described his youth in 1950s New York City, to becoming D.C. Bar president in 1985, Fred Abramson seized every available educational opportunity to forge his remarkable career. He recognized that education would unlock the world for him and give him the ability to help others improve themselves and their community.

Abramson's work was cut short when he passed away in 1991, tragically young, at age 56. In the wake of his death, Abramson's many friends began a scholarship foundation — the Frederick B. Abramson Memorial Foundation — to honor his commitment to education and mentorship of those who came from communities similar to his.

"He never forgot the crucial role education played in his success, and he had a special concern for people seeking to pursue their dreams of higher education," said then-D.C. Superior Court Judge Gladys Kessler at the time of Abramson's death. "He understood that when well-educated young people return to their community, they improve it — not just through their own success but by their participation in civic life."

Today, 30 years later, the Abramson Scholarship Foundation, as it is now known, continues his legacy, turning the college dreams of D.C. public high school students into reality. Since its establishment, the foundation has supported some 325 students. Ninety percent of its scholars graduate from college within five years of enrollment, a remarkable achievement.

SUCCESSES & LEGACY

Abramson's educational journey began when he was admitted to Stuyvesant High School, a public school for the academically gifted in New York City. But when his sister Pearl spotted an ad in the *Amsterdam News* offering scholarships to African American students to Cornwall Academy, a New England private school, she urged him to apply. Abramson won the scholarship for his final two years of high school. He was the first Black student in the school. In fact, for a time he was the only Black person in the town where the school was located.

As Abramson recounted in a 1985 interview with the *Washington Post* after he was elected president of the Bar, his parents, a St. Croix-born elevator operator and a food service worker, "brought me up to believe in honesty, hard work and achievement" and "instilled discipline." They recognized the importance education would play in their son's life.

From high school, Abramson attended Yale University on scholarship, one of only four Black students in the class of 1956. He then studied law at the University of Chicago, graduating in 1959. Soon after, Abramson was recruited to work for Attorney General Robert Kennedy at the U.S. Department of Justice. On becoming attorney general, Kennedy "wanted the complexion of the Department of Justice to change." Abramson's years as an elite civil appellate lawyer at the department inspired his dedication to public service and his commitment to opening doors for others.

Abramson's trailblazing legal career continued in private practice in Washington, D.C., where he encouraged minority lawyers to apply to large law firms and motivated them to succeed. As one of his colleagues noted, Abramson was an elder statesman among Black lawyers. He served as a mentor to a generation of minority lawyers, writing recommendations, helping them find housing, introducing them to the local legal

community, and providing career advice. In his oral history for the D.C. Circuit Historical Society, retired U.S. District Court Judge Henry Kennedy Jr. credited Abramson with encouraging him to apply to become a U.S. magistrate judge, the beginning of Kennedy's judicial career.

But Abramson was not defined by his legal work alone. At the time of his death, his résumé listed membership in 29 professional and community organizations, many of which he chaired. Abramson gave back to the community in countless ways. Among his proudest achievements was his service as chair of the D.C. Judicial Nomination Commission, which is responsible for recommending lawyers for appointment to the D.C. Courts. Through his work with the commission, Abramson dramatically changed the face of the local judiciary.

In Abramson's obituary, Judge Kessler, now retired from the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, recounted his "enormous impact" on Washington, D.C.'s legal landscape. "Fred made extraordinary efforts to reach out and recruit minorities and people who might otherwise not have had an opportunity to be considered for the bench, including lawyers from small firms, government career lawyers, women and minorities," Kessler said.

FROM SCHOLARS TO MENTORS

Abramson's untimely death took him from the D.C. community, but his friends, many of whom he mentored, committed to keeping his unique spirit alive through the Abramson Scholarship Foundation. Like Abramson, the foundation's scholarship recipients have overcome significant challenges — most are the first in their family to attend college, many live in single-parent households, some are from homes where English is not the first language, and a few have been homeless. But all are dedicated to learning and giving back to their communities.



The foundation's scholars have assumed Abramson's mantle thanks to their education, their mentors, and their dedication to the District of Columbia.

Abramson Scholarship Foundation

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Take, for example, D.C. Councilmember Janeese Lewis George, a 2006 Abramson scholarship recipient who now represents Ward 4. George is a graduate of the School Without Walls High School, St. John's University, and Howard University School of Law and a member of the D.C. Bar. With the foundation's mentoring support, which she says "made all the difference" in her life as a first-generation college student, George pursued her education to fulfill her dream of public service and "paid it forward" by mentoring another first-generation college student, 2013 Abramson scholar Charleene Smith.

Smith, a 2020 graduate of Notre Dame Law School, attended McKinley Technology High School and was a Trachtenberg Scholar at George Washington University. Smith, too, will continue the tradition of offering a hand up. "While I could never repay the foundation for what they have invested in me, I am paying it forward by serving on the foundation's Alumni Advisory Committee to assist scholars in their education journey," says Smith, a member of the D.C. Bar.

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Another demonstration of Abramson's enduring impact on this community is 2011 Abramson scholar Yasmine Arrington, who grew up with an incarcerated parent. In 2010, while still a student at Benjamin Banneker High School, Arrington started the nonprofit scholarship foundation ScholarCHIPS for children with an incarcerated parent. She continued to lead the nonprofit while also obtaining her undergraduate degree from Elon University and her master of divinity degree from Howard University. This year the *Washington Business Journal* recognized her in its "40 Under 40" list of greater Washington community leaders.

Arrington credits the foundation with supporting her passion for learning, broadening her view of the world, and inspiring her to share her commitment to serve an often-overlooked group of young people.

Then there is Erika Ventura-Castellon, a 2014 Abramson scholar who attended Woodrow Wilson High School and was a first-generation college graduate of the University of Kentucky College of Nursing. While in college, she served as a mentor with Leading Latinas to encourage young girls to attend college. Since graduation, Ventura-Castellon has been a children's nurse at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital and was chosen by the National Association of Hispanic Nurses as a 2020

recipient of its 40 Under 40 Award. She will soon begin studying for her PhD at the University of Maryland School of Nursing.

Helping her soar in college, in her career, and in her community was Abramson Foundation mentor Cathy Simon, a retired law firm partner. Simon says volunteering with the foundation provided her an opportunity to "give back to the community in a way I couldn't do while I was working and raising a family." She had no idea how rewarding the experience would be, says Simon, "nor did I know that our mentoring relationship would grow into the intergenerational friendship that Erika and I share today."

Abramson scholars are also among the foundation's leaders. Current president Aaron Jenkins, a 1999 scholarship recipient, graduated from Williams College and is now a sought-after Washington policy, advocacy, and strategy consultant. His Abramson mentor was former District of Columbia Attorney General Irvin Nathan.

"I am very proud, after my long service to the Abramson Foundation, that my greatest legacy to this wonderful organization is my mentoring two decades ago ... of Aaron Jenkins," says Nathan. "Mentoring by seasoned professionals is just as critical as the financial aid that Abramson provides, and it is both extremely beneficial to the first-generation college student and psychologically rewarding to the mentor." Jenkins, in turn, has mentored dozens of young scholars to help them navigate the unfamiliar territory of college and vows to continue to do so.

James McClelland, a 2002 Abramson scholar and currently director of accounting at Fannie Mae, has just completed more than a decade serving the foundation in various capacities, including as treasurer, board member, and mentor. And Roger Sanchez, a 2013 scholar and an associate director in D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser's office, is a new Abramson Foundation board member and mentor. These nonprofit leaders have assumed Abramson's mantle thanks to their education, their mentors, and their dedication to the District of Columbia. They will continue to encourage the next generation of young people to lead and to give back, as Abramson did.

Fred Abramson passed away 30 years ago, and those of us who knew him personally miss him still. His calm demeanor, his penetrating intelligence, his care for others, his empathy with all persons, even those from backgrounds much different than his own, and his desire to serve this community were extraordinary. Therefore, it is not surprising that his spirit lives on in the legacy of education, mentoring, and service that the Abramson Scholarship Foundation represents.

Abramson would have agreed with Benjamin Franklin that "an investment in knowledge pays the greatest interest." Thanks to Abramson and the foundation that bears his name, generations of young Washingtonians are proof of that. 

D.C. Bar Board of Governors member Sally Gere was vice president and a longtime board member of the Abramson Scholarship Foundation, where she serves as a mentor. She retired as a deputy attorney general from the Office of the Attorney General for the District of Columbia in 2018. Myles V. Lynk is a past D.C. Bar president, a founding member and past president of the Frederick B. Abramson Memorial Foundation, and a current member of the Abramson Scholarship Foundation board. He is the senior assistant disciplinary counsel in charge of appellate practice at the D.C. Office of Disciplinary Counsel.