

Krystal Williams completing her thru-hike on the Appalachian Trail in 2011. Before Maine Law won her over, the state itself had already worked its magic after her hike. “I was the typical thru-hiker,” she says, “getting to the Katahdin sign with tears streaming down my face.”





## Krystal Williams '17 and The Alpha Legal Foundation

By Liz Woodbury

**W**hen she made the decision to attend Maine Law, Krystal Williams, Class of 2017, was inclined to think of law school in terms of “checking off one more box” along the course of her flourishing corporate career path. Williams was a “nontraditional student,” a description she chuckles at but concurs with. “I was nontraditional in terms of my age, but especially my experience,” she says. She had already worked for more than a decade as a senior manager at a Fortune 500 company, where she was encouraged by the senior in-house counsel to pursue a law degree. He was impressed by her attention to detail, as well as the extra work she shouldered to decipher the varying state regulations that directly affected her company. Williams was also motivated by her own determination to fully understand the underlying legal concepts in her field. “I don’t like not knowing stuff!” she says.

It wasn’t a surprise to Williams to find herself thriving on the academic rigors and challenges of law school, as she had at Dartmouth’s Tuck School of Business, where she received her M.B.A. What did amaze her was how she came to feel about the law itself. “I didn’t expect to love the law – and to especially love what it can enable in society in a positive way.”

Before Maine Law won her over, the state itself had already worked its magic. Williams, who grew up in the South and spent eight years in the Midwest, is a world traveler who also served a Peace Corps stint in the Dominican Republic. But it was Maine she fell for, after completing a thru-hike on the Appalachian Trail in 2011. “I was the typical thru-hiker,” she says, “getting to the Katahdin sign with tears streaming down my face.”

The 2,000 mile hike was an enormous personal challenge: “It was a dream I had as a freshman in college, but it took me 19 years to gather the courage to try.” The experience left her with a profound sense of accomplishment and an entirely new kind of confidence, not to mention an affection for the state. “I left to go back to my job in Illinois being absolutely in love with Maine,” she says. She checked, “almost on a whim,” to see whether Maine had a law school.

Conversations with Maine Law professors cemented Williams’s certainty that the school would offer a solid legal education. “I was impressed with how knowledgeable they were about the law. I also felt confident I would be able to bring who I really am to the table and that I wouldn’t

I had a lot of my fellow students of color coming to me to talk through these issues.” She co-founded the Multicultural Law Society, which focuses on issues that affect underrepresented ethnic groups and provides a forum for the Law School community to address racial inequities in the law. After her first year of legal practice, Williams found herself wondering how she could forge these kinds of connections with other attorneys of color in Maine, and in 2019 she began pulling together resources that could help her achieve this goal.

In January of 2020, Williams officially launched The Alpha Legal Foundation, an organization that sponsors programs and events “designed to equip traditionally underrepresented attorneys and aspiring at-

students of color a path to law school and providing examples of success in the legal profession. “If you don’t have lawyers in your family, you’re at an automatic disadvantage,” says Williams.

The Alpha Legal Foundation’s inaugural program was the three-part Legally Racist series, presented in conjunction with the Maine Humanities Council (MHC). Each online session features a guest panel and the first panel was moderated by the MHC’s Michele Hicks-Curry, an accomplished Black Navy veteran who is currently serving a two-year sentence at the Maine Correctional Center. The first session, held on September 24, had over 100 attendees and focused on language and the law. Williams describes it as “a powerful conversation that’s received very positive feedback.” The series, which explored the way laws and legal norms perpetuate systemic inequality, was available to current law students, recent graduates, attorneys, and members of Maine Bar Association.

While her long-term goals for The Alpha Legal Foundation include diversifying a notoriously white industry, creating a more equitable Bar, and increasing representation in positions of power in the state, for Williams, there’s something else as well: “Rarely, if ever, is a lawyer portrayed in the media as unintelligent. A law degree automatically confers a presumption of intelligence that isn’t always present, even if a person of color has another advanced degree.” This is an important element of her view that inspiring BIPOC high school and college students to consider a career in law is essential.

Williams comes from a large, close family, and she prioritizes them when balancing her busy environmental law practice and her work with The Alpha Legal Foundation. “You show up where you need to be for things that are important,” she says. Her many personal goals include returning to the Appalachian Trail. “This year is the tenth anniversary of my hike,” Williams says in amazement. “I want to experience that again, with the wisdom I have now – not just from hiking it once, but also the wisdom I’ve gotten from living life.”

Williams recently started a new endeavor with the launch of Providentia Group, a legal and business advisory firm that helps clients build a more equitable future. Learn more on their website: [providentiagroup.com](http://providentiagroup.com).



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be told that as a Black woman I had to be careful about how I talked.” Although she struggled initially with the choice between law schools, she says, “Once I gave myself permission to ask what would make me happy, the answer became so crystal clear.”

Williams had worked hard to succeed in the corporate world, overcoming a variety of obstacles along the way, but her experiences at Maine Law helped her begin to contextualize specific racist experiences she’d had at work. “2014 was the year Michael Brown was killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri,” she says. Processing his death and the varied reactions and conversations it spurred among her classmates and acquaintances led to a time she describes now as personally transformative. “That’s when I really started learning about implicit bias and putting my own experience in perspective,” says Williams. It was then that the seed of The Alpha Legal Foundation was planted.

“There were no existing ‘lawyers of color’ groups at Maine Law, and I found

attorneys to navigate the existing legal power structures while engaging in authentic partnership with current legal leaders to remove unnecessary barriers to success.” While she was inspired by groups that focus on both women and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) in the law, she didn’t find a clear example that was dedicated to engaging with both the legal and business communities. Williams considers Maine to be the perfect location for this kind of project. “The whole state is really a large town; you’re rarely more than two or three degrees of separation from anyone. I’ve found leaders to be very accessible.”

Williams describes three broad goals for The Alpha Legal Foundation, starting with a robust mentoring mechanism for practicing BIPOC attorneys in Maine. She is also focused on engaging the broader community around race, including the business and nonprofit worlds. Finally, she hopes to “reach back and take the hands of leaders in the next generation to help them move forward,” showing young