

May 10, 2024

Re: Shawn Barksdale

To Whom It May Concern:

I write this letter to endorse Shawn Barksdale as a speaker who helped my law students understand how to build relationships with clients, as well as to understand how best to represent and support those clients when they are housed in the Department of Corrections.

I teach a course to help students learn how to engage in pretrial litigation in a civil rights context, using a Muslim prisoner religious liberty casefile that I created based in the Virginia Department of Corrections. In the course, students learn how to tell the inmate's side of the case in a compelling narrative, but also to understand the perspectives and priorities of the prison officials as they consider whether to allow religious accommodations. I ask my students to argue sides over the course of the semester so that they can understand the strongest arguments to make, as well as how best to seek common ground for a just settlement, regardless of whom they represent.

I invited Shawn because I had heard him speak previously about his experience as a Muslim prisoner in the Virginia Department of Corrections. I thought that, in order for my students to truly understand how to tell the plaintiff's story and understand an incarcerated client's perspective, they should hear from someone who experienced life as a Muslim prisoner in the Virginia Department of Corrections. And he was able to authentically convey the experience of receiving a significant sentence at a young age, the importance of specific religious observances to inmates like him who were seeking redemption while in prison, and the frustration and anxiety arising from being unable to fully comply with religious practice. He brought our casefile to life.

However, equally importantly, Shawn was also able to convey an understanding of how prison officials were thinking, to help students walk in prison officials' shoes. He described the legitimate concerns of prison officials in view of their responsibilities and the realities of prison life, and how he was able to build trust as a leader who understood those concerns and addressed them, while advocating for his rights.

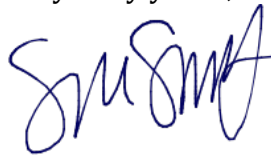
Aside from his visit to my class, Shawn also found common ground and contributed his ideas and experience to my colleagues on the clinical faculty while he was visiting in our offices. I expect several of us will include him in future classes and projects, where his experience, energy, and desire to help achieve change will be an asset.

One of my students wrote in a reflection after the class:

Whether it's educational programs, mental health services, or religious accommodations, we need to invest more in these rehabilitative and restorative resources for incarcerated individuals so upon release they have the best opportunity for success upon reentry; Mr. Barksdale is the proof of concept. Lastly, for what it's worth Mr. Barksdale gave a better lecture than some professors I have had as a student over the years, and there's certainly an educational institution that'd be lucky to have him on staff.

So, I highly recommend inviting Shawn as a speaker or participant on building relationships and trust between inmates and staff, and attorneys and their clients, both in the specific area of religious practice in prisons, but also more broadly in the area of experience in the criminal justice system and reentry into the community.

Very truly yours,



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