



July 1, 2020

Dear JMLBA Members, Sponsors, and Allies:

We are honored and humbled to have the privilege to serve as members of the leadership team of the John Mercer Langston Bar Association (JMLBA) for the 2020–2021 membership year. In 1998, Black attorneys came together to form JMLBA—Central Ohio’s first unified bar association for Black lawyers.

Since that time, JMLBA’s mission and purpose has been to promote professional development, networking, mentoring, and community activism. In line with that mission, JMLBA has worked to advance diversity and inclusion in the legal profession, provided CLE opportunities for members and the legal community, connected our community through networking and celebrating our achievements, increased scholarships for Black law students, and strengthened relationships with community partners. We look forward to building upon the solid foundation that our previous leadership established.

Undoubtedly, this year has been challenging. First, an unprecedented global health pandemic struck, highlighting what we have long known to be true: significant disparities persist in Black communities across the country, including here in Central Ohio. Critical issues, including equitable access to health care, education, housing, childcare, small business resources, and mental health services, as well as food insecurity, income inequality, disproportionate mortality rates, and heightened unemployment rates are all being spotlighted. As COVID-19 continues to devastate our country and the world, these disparities will inevitably give rise to unique and profound impacts on the mental, fiscal, and physical health of Black Americans.

Simultaneously, our country is also experiencing what can only be described as a long-overdue awakening on racial equality. This awakening was most immediately foreshadowed by the vigilante assassination of a man running while Black, the erroneous and fatal execution of a no-knock-warrant on a woman sleeping while Black, the calling of 911 by a white woman seeking to weaponize race against a man who was bird-watching while Black, and an excruciating 8-minute, 46-second-long public lynching. The national outrage that has followed these horrific and senseless events presents the opportunity to be truly transformative. However, to cultivate lasting transformation, we must all take action now to ensure that this is not just a moment in time, but a movement that results in meaningful and sustained change.

To Our Sponsors and Allies: Your role cannot be understated. We ask that you remove the barriers in your respective organizations that have long prevented the advancement of Black people in the legal profession. We ask that you reach beyond the legal profession and into the community-at-large. We ask that you educate yourselves and others, and have explicit and uncomfortable conversations in your homes and workplaces regarding the legacy of slavery, disenfranchisement, segregation, oppression,

and systemic racism rooted in racial superiority. Race is not an abstract topic to be debated, parsed, overanalyzed, or mocked. In no uncertain terms, systemic racism is a construct that only you, as our allies, can dismantle. So, we also expect you to make sincere programmatic—not merely performative—changes in your organizations and in your daily lives. To be clear, genuine programmatic changes include the following: hire Black law students, attorneys, and staff; thoughtfully assign work to Black employees; include Black employees as valued members of your team; fairly evaluate the work product of Black employees; sponsor your Black colleagues; promote Black employees to positions of influence in your organization; equitably compensate your Black employees; offer pro bono legal services to Black business owners and the Black community; and support Black-owned businesses as an individual and corporate consumer. As Maya Angelou said, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

To Our Community: We understand that being criminalized for how we show up in the world is inexplicably traumatic. We also understand the inherent barriers designed to keep us marginalized. Our understanding, however, is insufficient. It is part of JMLBA’s purpose to be a resource to you; to distill what is a complex legal system, fraught with systemic biases, and ensure that it functions with equal justice as its goal; and to strive to dismantle access barriers. Our commitment to you is one of refocused and reprioritized service in the fight against racial injustice. Further, we commit to deepening our support of Black-owned businesses in Central Ohio. We will seek out opportunities to collaborate with each other and connect resources within our community.

To Our Members: Elaine Welteroth once said, “Sometimes just being yourself is the radical act. When you occupy space in systems that weren’t built for you, your authenticity is your activism.” For far too long, we, like so many of you, have spent an inordinate amount of time meticulously crafting our professional personas to accommodate the professional spaces we occupy. We are exhausted, but our exhaustion does not outweigh our hope. It is our sincere intention that over the course of this membership year, we can help create space for you to grieve, to be in fellowship, to change, to advocate, and to grow. With these aims in mind, we are excited to launch a number of new programming initiatives including: Rise Together; Network | Net Worth; Sustaining Excellence; Servant Leadership; Celebrating Us; and Community Activism. You can learn more about each of these initiatives on the new JMLBA website that launched today (www.jmlba.org).

There is no doubt in our minds that this is a pivotal moment in history. What we, collectively, do in this moment matters. Our organization is at its best when we collaborate: it is your ideas, suggestions, sponsorship, and leadership that make JMLBA great. Please continue to reach out and share your ideas and your experiences, your aspirations, and your insights. We look forward to a year of hope, growth, and change. After all, “we are our ancestors’ wildest dreams.”

Thank you for the opportunity to serve. We look forward to working with you this year.

Sincerely,



Janay M. Stevens

President



Arryn K. Miner

President-Elect