



‘Lawyer plus’: New executive director of legal nonprofit aims to help residents in and out of the courtroom



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She found her calling from a coconut tree in Jamaica.

Makiedah Messam grew up in Montego Bay, surrounded by a white sandy beach, majestic palm trees, and healthy coconut trees.

Coconuts are a vital resource in Jamaica, being used for many things like baking, lowering blood pressure, flavoring water, and building roofs.

When her family took her outside of the city to the countryside, the coconut trees she saw on the drive there weren't as beautiful, finding out it was a result of yellow disease, she said.

“It looked sad, and it just bothered me,” Ms. Messam said. “From that moment on, I decided that what I was going to do was find a cure for yellow

disease for the people who rely on this because I know the hardship that it will bring. I never found the cure for yellow disease.”

Instead, Ms. Messam chose to help people by becoming a lawyer. She will continue that work as the new executive director for Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, or ABLE, a nonprofit law firm that provides legal representation in noncriminal cases for low income residents.

“I’m excited to be able to lead this organization into the next growth level and area for the organization,” she said. “I believe that the environment we find ourselves in, which we find a lot of legal aid and legal justice organizations, is struggling for new and better ways to serve a population.”

It’s not enough to help people inside of the courtroom, she said, which is why ABLE has and will continue to focus on being what she describes as a “lawyer plus” organization.

The Ohio-based nonprofit is focusing on efforts like forming a tenant union in West Dayton and helping the homeless by adding a social worker to help provide wraparound services as well as driver’s license reinstatement, which is a great need in the northwest and central part of the state, Ms. Messam said.

“We serve a lot of counties where there isn’t really much access to public transportation,” she said. “People can’t get to work, they can’t feed their families, they can’t drive around. All these things that you see the governor announce, when we’re talking about big tech moving here and semiconductors moving here, how can they get the people that they need?”

“Not everybody lives in Columbus, Cincinnati, and Cleveland. We need people coming in from Springfield. We need people coming in from Lima.”

The coronavirus pandemic brought to light a change amongst the population, she said.

It showed that a lot of people aren't technically “poor” according to federal guidelines but still need help regaining stability.

“The pandemic exposed was that you have, I'm going to call them working people, who had something happen and they're in the bread line. ... I'm hoping to be able to raise more funds to be able to deal with a wider demographic who are just on that edge,” Ms. Messam said.

Before she earned the role, Ms. Messam acted as interim executive director of the city of Cincinnati's Citizen Complaint Authority, where she coordinated investigations for citizen complaints against the Cincinnati Police Department and did the same in Jamaica as director of the Independent Commission of Investigations.

It takes everyone, “black, white, green, blue, whatever color you are,” to ensure equality for all residents in Ohio, said Khadijah Ali, vice president of the board of trustees for ABLE.

It also takes strong leaders to help move that effort forward, which is why Ms. Messam is the best person to help the organization contribute to that change, Ms. Ali said.

Ms. Ali said the new executive director made a strong impression on her with her distinct “presence” and confidence, which she noticed when Ms. Messam spoke as well as through her body language.

“I saw this about her and after finding out how she dealt with policy issues for underprivileged communities and dealing with senators and police departments, pulling these people together to help to deal with the injustices and discriminations that are going on, as a client board member, that meant a lot to me,” she said.

The trustees' vice president said she appreciates Ms. Messam's track record because Ms. Ali has experienced her fair share of trauma from discrimination and injustices.

“We have to find a way to come together for a common goal so we can make our community better and this is what I see in Makiedah,” she said.



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