

NINA MOINI: Two Minnesotans have made history, becoming the first people in the country to earn a law school degree from an accredited program while incarcerated. Their graduation from Mitchell Hamline School of Law marks the latest milestone in a years-long effort to expand access to legal education into prisons.

Here's Jeffery Young, one of the two graduates, speaking at his graduation ceremony at the Minnesota Correctional Facility in Shakopee last month.

JEFFERY YOUNG: I read that entire case of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, rather than the little snippets that we get in our history books. And in that case, which outlawed segregation in public schools, the court said education is the very foundation of good citizenship. Education is the very foundation of good citizenship. Can I get you all to repeat that with me?

CROWD: Education is the very foundation of good citizenship.

JEFFERY YOUNG: Mitchell Hamline, from the very beginning, the professors were very welcoming. The student body was amazingly welcoming. And as an incarcerated person, I've always sizing somebody up, so, OK, well, how are you going to view me?

What are you looking at? Do you see an incarcerated person? Do you see a criminal? Do you see just a regular person? And I can say that Mitchell Hamline saw a law student from the get-go and never questioned.

[APPLAUSE]

NINA MOINI: That was incarcerated law school graduate Jeffery Young. Mitchell Hamline school of law professor Jared Mollenkof helped Maureen Onyelobi and Jeffery Young navigate their studies in the first-of-its-kind program. He joins me on the line now to talk about it. Welcome, Professor Mollenkof.

JARED MOLLENKOF: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: What an exciting, historic graduation. Could you tell us a little bit about how the program came to be and why you've made this push for getting people incarcerated educated about the law?

JARED MOLLENKOF: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. And yeah, that graduation was absolutely amazing. Both of the students' speeches were just so compelling. And it was absolutely one of the most life-affirming things that I've been a part of in a while. And so yeah, this program is really exciting.

The original motivation for the program was deeply rooted in this goal of trying to ensure that the people most impacted by the criminal legal system have access to education about the system that they are in and have the opportunity to learn more about it, as well as shifting the paradigm and trying to break down this distinction between the "us" and the "them," those of us that are currently unincarcerated and people who are currently incarcerated and trying to get people to see that folks that are incarcerated right now have the capacity to go to law school, have the ability to achieve within our system, and have learned incredible lessons from the process of being within the criminal legal system and having to navigate being charged with crimes and that that experience and the knowledge and wisdom that comes from the experience of having to reckon with having been convicted of violations of the law prepares you for law school in a unique way and gives you the opportunity to contribute to the classroom in a unique and really powerful way.

And so I think that this is an amazing moment for legal education. I think it's an incredible moment for what we mean about who can participate and who can be members of the legal profession. And so I'm very excited about what this means for my profession and what it means for legal education.

NINA MOINI: Amazing. Would you tell us a little bit about how it works, practically speaking? How is somebody who's incarcerated able to take the classes through Mitchell Hamline? How does it work?

JARED MOLLENKOF: Absolutely. So this program started as a partnership between Mitchell Hamline, The Legal Revolution, which is part of the nonprofit All Square, and a partnership with the Minnesota Department of Corrections.

And so both of these students who just graduated, Jeff and Maureen, were able to attend law school because our former dean, Dean Anthony Niedwiecki, actually went in person to the Shakopee and Bayport prisons in order to administer the LSAT.

So these students took the LSAT just like anybody else would on going to law school. They went through the standard admissions process that any student would go through. And then they attended our full-time program remotely from inside of the two facilities where they're at.

And so they took the classes over Zoom and then participated, submitting their assignments and the exams and whatnot through an online interface. And the professors were able to engage with them both in office hours and during class time over Zoom.

And the Minnesota Department of Corrections, Commissioner Schnell-- they've just been amazing in their work with us around this. And All Square has done an incredible job. The Legal Revolution has done an incredible job.

They cover all of the expenses around the students' tuition. And they are the ones that have really been able to facilitate this work happening alongside the faculty here at Mitchell Hamline. And so there are a lot of people that have been instrumental in making a really difficult thing happen.

NINA MOINI: It takes a lot of intentional effort by a lot of people, it sounds like. So you taught one of Jeffery's classes, but you oversaw both Jeffery and Maureen's work in some capacity. We heard a little bit from Jeffery earlier. Let's take a listen now to some of the remarks from Maureen Onyelobi at her graduation last month.

MAUREEN ONYELOBI: As I close this law school chapter and prepare to take the bar exam and become an ambassador for change--

[CHEERS, APPLAUSE]

--I will persevere, just like I did when I was 10 years old.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: That's right. Absolutely.

MAUREEN ONYELOBI: And this journey has not been easy. But today, I can confidently say I got my fearlessness back.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Come on!

[CHEERS, APPLAUSE]

NINA MOINI: What does it make you feel like to hear that from students?

JARED MOLLENKOF: I think it's just incredible. Anyone that goes into higher education is doing so because they want to support students. They want to expand the students' perspective of what they are capable of and what potential they have.

And so seeing these students realize their potential, graduate with honors, write articles that are going to get published, just do incredible things and be such an important part of our community here, well loved by the other students-- all of those things are inspiring.

And it really reminds you why you work in education and why you care about the stuff. Because giving somebody the opportunity to show that despite what preconceptions people might have about folks that are incarcerated, despite what people might believe about the potential of somebody who is currently inside of a prison that they have been able to show that they do have the capacity to graduate from law school and to do amazing things. And I'm really excited about what they do going forward.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And they would also still need to pass the bar exam and go through some of the other reviews other applicants go through. But what do you hope comes next for them? Or have you thought about the types of legal careers that might be possible for folks after they're released?

JARED MOLLENKOF: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. And so both of the students, while they were in law school, had internships, first through The Legal Revolution and then with the Sentencing Project. So they've been able to show that they can do remote work while they are incarcerated.

I hope that while they're inside, that they'll have the opportunity to both help other folks that are inside or do whatever they would like to with the education that they've received while they're there.

And then on their release, they are taking the bar exam. My hope is that they will have exciting careers. And so they'll take the bar exam in February. Every indication that is that they're strong students who are likely to pass the bar exam. And I'm excited to see them go on and be able to shape their careers and make the most of this opportunity.

NINA MOINI: And just lastly, Jared, have you talked to other programs in the region about maybe expanding law education to more incarcerated people? Or what do you hope-- how do you hope it grows?

JARED MOLLENKOF: Absolutely. Our hope is that other law schools will take on similar projects, that The Legal Revolution will be able to shape partnerships with other law schools. And I'm really excited about the possibility that there will be programs like this within other department of corrections, partnerships with other law schools, and that this will be something that expands beyond Minnesota.

NINA MOINI: Thank you so much for your time and your work. We really appreciate it.

JARED Thank you.

MOLLENKOF:

NINA MOINI: That was Jared Mollenkof, assistant professor at Mitchell Hamline School of Law.