

# Sample Personal Statements

*The following is a sample of the format for a 1L diversity scholarship/fellowship personal statement. Although this sample is representative of the types of questions asked, you should always carefully read the particular fellowship application and address the specific criteria requested by that employer.*

## **Ima Firstyear**

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### **Personal Statement**

Born and raised in France by Vietnamese parents, I had never realized that my coming to the U.S. at age 18 was going to be the most challenging experience of my life, from an educational, as well as cultural and personal, perspective. Already struggling with the French culture with which I had always identified, and the Vietnamese culture in which I was raised, I felt even more internally and socially conflicted trying to deal with the American culture in which I was now living. While trying to embrace all three cultures at once, I realized that I had only been left confused, and with hardly anything consistent from any of the cultures I was struggling to preserve.

In addition, my confusion and sense of loss grew as I realized not only was my cultural identity subject to change, but my career goals were as well. Although I considered pursuing a legal career as a teenager, for many years I felt that such a career was beyond my grasp. Advisors, peers, and family members made it clear to me that as a non-native speaker, my chances to succeed in the legal field were slim. Nonetheless, as I progressed in my education at Oregon State University, I realized that my ambitions and my unique background have provided me with life experiences and skills that others do not have and will actually help me to succeed as a lawyer. The unique and diverse background that has motivated me to thrive academically will allow me to contribute to the diversity of the legal community and to the Portland community as a whole.

Within a few months after starting at Oregon State University, I decided to use my bicultural background as a tool to explore the American culture. I became a member of several student organizations, including the Asian Student Association, which later became my most important source of support. During my junior year, I was elected to the position of community liaison. Serving as the organization's spokesperson in the community and reaching out to all Vietnamese students has helped me refine my leadership, organizational, and communication skills. In addition, it has given me the opportunity to remain connected and exposed to the Vietnamese culture.

As an officer, I contributed to the development of the second largest Vietnamese Culture Show in Oregon which hosted over 200 people from all over the Portland community. Its main purpose was to promote awareness of Vietnamese culture and traditions, and to help Vietnamese students remain connected to their culture. In 2004, I also helped create the Children's Program, designed to teach the Vietnamese language to Vietnamese children adopted by Caucasian parents.

For two years, I also volunteered as an English tutor for Hispanic and Asian children participating in the English as a Second Language program at Shaver Elementary School. I had the rewarding

experience of tutoring third and fourth graders and helping them overcome the same language barriers that I had encountered five years before.

As a first year law student, I have also contributed to the diversity of Lewis & Clark. As a member of the Minority Law Student Association, I have actively participated in several activities such as the mentoring program with Rosemary Anderson Alternative High School. Through the program, I have established a strong mentor/mentee relationship with an African-American student considered "at risk". I have done my best to provide a positive adult role model and to encourage her to graduate from high school and pursue a college education. I am also a member of the Oregon State Bar Affirmative Action Program. Last August, I participated in several of their programs such as the Opportunity for Law in Oregon (OLIO) program and BOWLIO where I had the opportunity to build relationships with law students of color from other schools and with successful attorneys practicing in various legal sectors throughout the Portland area.

My coming to Portland was by far the greatest challenge I have had to overcome, and yet it has been the most rewarding, too. While I have managed to succeed academically, I have also managed to remain connected to my cultural roots. Most importantly, I have been able to give back to the community. Over the years, I have built a great network of support through the Portland and minority communities. Because I plan to remain in Portland to practice law, I strongly believe that this scholarship will give me get a significant start on my legal career. It will also allow me to gain the experience necessary to succeed as an attorney, and to refine and further my professional aspirations. My growing attachment to the Portland community was the reason I chose to attend Lewis & Clark Law School, and I am determined to continue contributing to the diversity of this community as a legal practitioner as well.

*The following is a sample of the format for an Equal Justice personal statement. Although this sample is representative of the types of questions asked, you should always carefully read the particular fellowship application and address the specific criteria requested by that employer*

## **Mary Ann Smith**

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### **Personal Statement**

“You should see what they’ve started to do here, Mary,” my mother said in one of our frequent telephone conversations. “They call it mountaintop removal.”

It was the first time I had heard of the devastating method of coal mining that was being practiced in my home state of West Virginia. At the time, I was in San Diego, California. I had moved there years before to attend college and to pursue an acting career. The acting career never panned out, but I did manage to marry the girl of my dreams and find a rewarding job in environmental education at SeaWorld. Nonetheless, I was still a West Virginia hillbilly, and coal was in my blood.

My granddaddy mined coal, and his daddy before him. In elementary school in the Mountain State they teach you that coal is something to be proud of—West Virginia may not have movie stars (Jennifer Garner notwithstanding) or Wall Street, but when I was in school, West Virginia was the number one coal producing state in the nation, and, by golly, that was something!

However, when my mother described mountaintop removal to me—the process of blasting mountains to smithereens and bulldozing tons of earth into streams in order to quickly and cheaply unearth coal—my heart sank. These were the hills and valleys that had nurtured me as a child. These were the mountains that had inspired John Denver—a man who knew true mountains—to immortalize West Virginia in song. And the people affected were my kin. To lay waste to the mountains and poison the state’s rivers seemed to me to be too great a duty for them to have to pay to King Coal.

That conversation with my mother sparked an epiphany and set me on the trajectory that led me to apply for this fellowship. I decided to take a step I had been considering for years—I would obtain my law degree, return home (traveling in the opposite direction from many of those with whom I grew up), and become an advocate for the mountains and their people.

I applied to only one law school, although my LSAT scores and my undergraduate success made me a highly recruited candidate. I chose to apply to Lewis & Clark Law School because it is the top rated environmental law school in the country.

In the fall of my second year of law school, I enrolled in a course entitled “Mining and Mineral Law.” This was my first opportunity to take courses in environmental law, and I was very excited. However, my excitement soon waned. The course had a bias towards western mining on public lands, and when the curriculum turned to mining on private lands—as is the practice in Appalachia—it quickly became obvious that the adjunct professors were out of their league. They had never heard of the lead cases in mountaintop removal coal mining—Bragg v. Robertson and *Kentuckians for the Commonwealth v. Rivenburgh*—let alone understood their significance. So I set out to teach myself.

I contacted Joe Lovett at the Appalachian Center for the Economy and the Environment—the attorney who had brought every major mountaintop removal case—and volunteered to work for his organization. I also studied Bragg and *Kentuckians for the Commonwealth* in detail. My mining professors invited

me to spend two class periods teaching the class about those cases and their significance, an invitation which I accepted.

In the spring of my second year of law school, I was elected Editor-in-Chief of *Environmental Law*, my law school's flagship journal. I seized that opportunity and solicited Professor Patrick McGinley of the West Virginia University College of Law to write an essay for the journal. Over the course of his career, Professor McGinley has represented many coalfield residents in their legal struggles with coal companies and the state agencies charged with regulating them. I asked Professor McGinley to pen a piece about the environmental justice aspects of mountaintop removal coal mining.

Professor McGinley agreed to write an essay for *Environmental Law*, but due to circumstances beyond our control, he was unable to complete it in time to put it through the normal cite checking process by second year law students. In order to publish the essay, I had to personally cite check all 497 footnotes and edit all 86 pages of the essay for substance, form, and style. I agreed to do so, notwithstanding the competing demands for my time. I was bound and determined to bring the regional issue of mountaintop removal coal mining to *Environmental Law's* national audience.

Working with Professor McGinley on the essay made clear to me that the characters missing from the story of mountaintop removal coal mining, as it had been told so far, were the people who lived near the mines. Mountaintop removal is more than an environmental tragedy—it is a human tragedy. The mountains that are being leveled in the name of profit stand in the backyards of thousands of impoverished West Virginians. The fly rock from the mines breaks their windows; the dust covers their laundry on their clotheslines; and the toxic metals unearthed in the mining process poison their air and water. Although I cannot take full credit for its content, I feel safe in taking credit for the fact that it has reached a wide audience.

So, having taught the law of mountaintop removal coal mining to students at the top environmental law school in the country, spread the word of the human tragedy of mountaintop removal coal mining to *Environmental Law's* national audience, and passed the February 2005 West Virginia bar exam, the time has come for me to return home. As the old saying goes, I am an American by birth, but a West Virginian by the grace of God. The mountains and their people are calling to me, and my place is with them.