

# UVA Law's Jah Akande Receives Award for Advocacy Efforts for People of Color, LGBTQ Rights

May 8, 2019

Jah Akande, who will join McGuireWoods as a first-year associate in 2020, has received UVA Law's inaugural Gregory H. Swanson Award for his commitment to justice. The award is named in honor of the law school's first black student.

As noted in a [UVA Today](#) article and video, Akande is a civil rights advocate dedicated to inclusion, justice and equity for others. His contributions include volunteering on matters with the Legal Aid Justice Center's JustChildren program and with the Migrant Farmworker Project; serving as education chair of UVA Law's Black Law Students Association; and helping indigent clients at the Office of the Federal Public Defender for the Eastern District of Virginia in Richmond, according to the [article](#) titled "Class of 2019: UVA Law Student Has Fought for Rights of People of Color, LGBT and Others."

Akande received McGuireWoods' Annual Diversity Scholarship and was a 2018 summer associate with the firm. He graduates from UVA Law on May 19.

The *UVA Today* article is below.

## Class of 2019: UVA Law Student Has Fought for Rights of People of Color, LGBT and Others

Before Jah Akande believed in others, his parents believed in him.

They were expecting their first child when a doctor spotted something troubling on their initial ultrasound: a cyst in the lung of the developing fetus. The cyst grew — in fact, tripled in size. The physicians considered prenatal surgery, "but it was just too risky," Akande said.

Fortunately, he was born without further complication.

"I thank my parents for really believing in me from when I was so small and believing that I could make it," he said. "They believed in me and I survived."

Nine months after his birth, the doctors operated to remove the cyst that was consuming his left lung.

"I have a pretty gnarly scar on my left side," he said. "Everyone laughs because I guess I have a big voice and a big personality. You wouldn't know this guy has, like, a lung and a bit [of a lung]."

A dedicated civil rights advocate, Akande will graduate May 19 from the University of Virginia School of Law with an even stronger voice for representing others. He will be an advocate with a law degree.

Akande, who is transgender, has been an activist since coming out as lesbian at age 13. Starting at age 15, he began lobbying the Virginia General Assembly for workplace nondiscrimination policies, an effort that he has maintained over the years. He majored in political science at the University of Richmond, **where he organized literal busloads of students** on behalf of LGBTQ rights.

After college, Akande transitioned to life as a male and went on to teach high school in the United Kingdom for three years before pursuing a law degree. He intends to bring his legal skills back home to Richmond.

"I am directly connected and accountable to my community," he said. "There's so much to do."

Since coming to UVA Law, Akande has continued to work on behalf of the rights of others as a member of the Program in Law and Public Service. That work has included volunteering on cases with the JustChildren program at the Legal Aid Justice Center.

In February, Akande and fellow third-year student Jacob Bradshaw helped get a client **released early from the Department of Juvenile Justice**. The youth was arrested after filming a video of two other teens fighting while egging them on. Imprisoned at 15 as part of a plea deal, he would have been incarcerated until age 21. Instead, he was freed by age 18.

"I saw him almost like a little brother," Akande said. "He is my brother's age. I was quite horrified by the sentence handed down. The system is not set up for people who look like us."

Akande has sought to promote justice through other involvements as well. He served as education chair of UVA Law's [award-winning Black Law Students Association](#), working as a "bridge-builder" between underrepresented students and their professors and peers. He was interviewed by NPR about transgender discrimination in health care; worked as a volunteer on the Migrant Farmworker Project, which helps protect migrant laborers in Central Virginia from exploitation; and interned at the Office of the Federal Public Defender for the Eastern District of Virginia in Richmond, to help indigent clients in need of defense.

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