



The NCBF Open Door Fellowship is a unique, competitive opportunity for first-year North Carolina law students. Open Door Fellows participate in a paid 10-week summer program providing an opportunity to gain experience in a legal work setting. Fellows benefit from meaningful professional experiences and opportunities to widen their professional networks, to “open doors” and prepare them for the next steps in their legal careers.

2024 Open Door Fellows



Darius Alexander is a law student at UNC Chapel Hill. Prior to law school, he attended East Carolina University and majored in Political Science and Philosophy. Originally from Connecticut, Darius has called North Carolina home for almost a decade and seeks to build a career in the Triad. He is a first-generation college graduate who hopes to begin a mentorship program for those in his community after earning his law degree. Through the fellowship, he spent his summer gaining experience at the law firm Craige Jenkins under the guidance of attorney Rebecca Smitherman.

This program has been transformative. As a first-generation college student and the only person in my extended family to even consider law school I possessed no prior knowledge of the inner workings of the profession. This program revealed the multi-faceted nature of the legal space and helped me cultivate relationships with amazing individuals that I will be able to carry with me for the rest of my career!

– Darius Alexander, 2024 Open Door Fellow



April Franklin is a law student at Elon University. Prior to attending law school, she worked in the healthcare industry and received a dual Master’s degree in Gerontology and Business Administration from UNC Greensboro. April is passionate about advocating for senior adults and educating their caregivers, which motivated her to start a business called Fresh Wave Care LLC and write a book titled *The Millennial’s Guide to Caregiving Brand*. April’s fellowship experience was hosted at The Fresh Market under the guidance of attorney Gerald Walden.

My experience as an Open Door Fellow has been a life changing one. From connecting with so many great individuals in the legal profession at the NCBA Annual conference, to the hands-on legal experience that I was able to obtain while working at The Fresh Market this summer; my life has been greatly enriched for the better. I’ve also been exposed to areas of the law that were not previously on my radar but are now areas that I am seriously considering exploring. Thank you again to the North Carolina Bar Foundation for investing in my legal career and providing me with an opportunity of a lifetime.

–April Franklin, 2024 Open Door Fellow

2023 Open Door Fellows



Tavaría Smith attends NC Central School of Law. She was a participant in Upward Bound, a college preparatory program designed to support low-income, first-generation college students. While earning her Bachelor of Arts in African American Studies with minors in Spanish and Women's Studies at the University of Georgia, Tavaría served as a Pre-Law Student Ambassador, Secretary of the Black Educational Support Team, and Ambassador for ExperienceUGA program. Tavaría has an interest in civil rights and served her Open Door Fellowship summer with the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission under the supervision of Lindsey Smith.

As a first-generation college and law student, I am truly grateful for this experience. Not only did I meet attorneys and judges, but I became aware of different areas of law. Before law school, I had a limited view of law, and that was of the criminal side. Since this program, I've enjoyed learning about the many areas of legal practice and hearing lawyers talk about why they love the work that they do.

– Tavaría Smith, 2023 Open Door Fellow



Zi Zhou is a student at UNC-Chapel Hill School of Law. She is a first-generation immigrant from Hunan, China who grew up in Madison County, NC and speaks Mandarin in addition to English. Zi serves on the Multicultural and Diversity Committee of UNC's Student Bar Association and is a member of the Asian-American Law Students Association and Women in Law. Zi's undergraduate degree is from UNC-Chapel Hill, where she received a B.A. dual majoring in Political Science and Peace, War and Defense. She has an interest in corporate law and served her Open Door Fellowship summer with the general counsel's office of the Local Government Federal Credit Union under the supervision of Dayatra Matthews.

The most rewarding aspect of the fellowship was the connections I was able to make. The relationships I developed went beyond the surface-level. Instead, I found mentor figures, identified role models, and built genuine friendships with individuals who shared similar goals and values as my own. The fellowship humanized the law school experience, which can often feel daunting and intimidating. It allowed me to reaffirm my purpose and the desire to achieve both personal and professional aspirations.

– Zi Zhou, 2023 Open Door Fellow

Thank you to the following employers for serving as hosts for the Open Door Fellows:

Craige Jenkins Liipfert & Walker, LLP
The Fresh Market
Local Government Federal Credit Union
NC Innocence Inquiry Commission

I was the first in my family to obtain a 4-year degree or to attend law school. I had no idea how to "open the door" to the legal profession, but I was fortunate to have several attorneys from my hometown mentor me along the way. Not everyone has this support. Through the Open Door Fellowship program, the NCBF assists law students from historically excluded or under-resourced backgrounds to make connections with other legal professionals and the NCBA. This is just one step toward increasing diversity in the legal profession, which is critical to serving our communities within our state.

– Patti Ramseur, NCBA+NCBF Immediate Past President

