

PLSE Announces Inaugural Mike Lee Fellow

November 14, 2018 – Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE) announced today that it has appointed Jarue Lawson as its inaugural Mike Lee Fellow.

The Mike Lee Fellowship in Criminal Justice is presented twice each year by PLSE to individuals who have (or have had) a criminal record, are interested in a career in criminal justice or community organizing, and have a commitment to social equity. For six months, Lee Fellows work alongside PLSE staff to engage with communities disproportionately affected by criminal records, and help PLSE better understand the challenges they are facing. Fellows will also propose a project to address an issue related to criminal records, which PLSE will support them in developing.

“We are very lucky to have Jarue as our first Mike Lee Fellow,” said PLSE Managing Attorney Zane Johnson. “His knowledge and experience give him deep insights into how we can best empower those facing the stigma that accompanies a criminal record. He will be a great resource for us and for the community.”

Mr. Lawson has a passion to help others and a personal understanding of the challenges people face when they have a criminal record. He is a Philadelphia native and 1995 graduate of Bartram Motivation High School, where he was an honors student. He then went on to study nursing administration and business management at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and Community College of Philadelphia respectively. During his 20 consecutive years of incarceration, he became passionate about social justice reform, activism, mentorship, and the role of identity in shaping one’s perspective and behavior. He currently works as a home healthcare aide, and in the past has worked as a certified tutor and in electrical maintenance, while receiving additional certifications in forklift operation and electronic technology.

“It’s important for people to understand that my story, like anyone else’s, is unique,” he said “Through reading, conversation with others, and self-reflection I realized that while people may share similar experiences, no two stories are the same. Understanding this fact helps me approach people without making assumptions, and with a genuine interest in who they are as a person. Taking the time to understand someone’s story, and the unique challenges they face, is the first step towards empowering individuals to reach their full potential.”

As a Mike Lee Fellow, Mr. Lawson will be a conduit for information between PLSE and the community. The Fellowship will also provide him with an opportunity to grow as a leader and share his perspective on the challenges people face when they’ve had contact with the criminal justice system. “In my experience, people who are not well informed get taken advantage of,” Jarue said. “We see that frequently in our justice system. This Fellowship gives me the opportunity to connect people with the information and resources they need, while also changing the way people think about what it means to have a record.”

ABOUT PLSE: PLSE provides free legal representation to low-income residents of Philadelphia whose criminal records are holding them back from achieving their potential as productive, contributing citizens. The services include seeking expungements in criminal court and pardons from the Governor, educating elected and community leaders, and empowering under-resourced communities to seek a greater voice and needed legislative reforms. The Fellowship is named in honor of Michael B. Lee, a former criminal defense lawyer and co-founder of PLSE. As PLSE’s first Executive Director, Mr. Lee organized hundreds of community education events and argued thousands of expungement petitions, while advocating for criminal history record reform and a new public understanding about criminal records.