

“LIVING THE DREAM” MENTOR AWARD ALUMNI HONOREES



Debo Adegbile '80

Associate director of litigation,
NAACP Legal Defense Fund

Debo Adegbile traces the roots of his values and worldview back to entering Manhattan Country School as a six-year-old. To Debo, son of Irish and Nigerian immigrants active in social justice, MCS seems a natural school for his family to have chosen. Studying the civil rights movement, developing a fuller appreciation of other cultures as well as the similarities and barriers between them, and undergoing the individual and relational process of forming identity were important experiences. “MCS planted the seeds....It does a better job than any other elementary school of teaching a deep understanding of the individual in relation to larger communities, whether it is the neighborhood, the country or the world at large.”

As a lawyer, Debo appreciates the way that MCS taught him to identify with other perspectives, which helps him understand his clients, and his adversaries, as well as the larger context in which cases or policy issues unfold. He learned to look beyond platitudes when measuring progress and that individuals, even young individuals, can fight against inequality and other social problems. These fundamental ideas, of which he grew to have a deeper understanding over time, led him to see the law as an agent of change.

Debo attended Fieldston High School, Connecticut College and New York University School of Law. He became an associate at the law firm Paul, Weiss, Rifkind,

Wharton, & Garrison, where he hung in his office a Robert Sengstacke portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr. that he first saw at MCS. The photo portrays a smiling Dr. King, an image that symbolized for Debo “his ability to rise above.” Working at the law firm provided Debo the opportunity to build his skills, to engage in pro bono cases, and to meet his mentor, Judge A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., civil rights advocate and the fifth African American to become a federal judge. Higginbotham introduced Debo to voting rights work, a focus he maintains in his current position as associate director of litigation at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

In connection with the renewal of important provisions of the Voting Rights Act, Debo worked to protect the voting rights of blacks and other underrepresented communities. This work has been the highlight of his legal career, sparking a passionate dedication. He draws energy from the idea that the successful effort will protect voices that need support. He works with “people of all races committed to civil rights at a time when people have lost, or never gained, the meaning of the civil rights movement. Keeping the continuing importance of the principles of equality alive brings a lot of satisfaction, and hope.”

Debo would like to thank his mother, Kathleen Mary Adegbile, who came to the United States from Dublin with the “heart and passion of a tiger”—her empathy, courage and tenacity inspired him. He also appreciates his close friendships with Carlos Garcia (MCS '80) and his brother Cris Garcia (MCS '84), with whom he went to high school and college. MCS would also like to express its gratitude to Debo, vice chairman of our board of trustees.

I know that the children of Manhattan Country School have a huge task before them...because the one thing that is to serve us and to save us is the extent to which our young people see each other in ways that are very different from the ways preceding generations saw each other. I am given a great sense of privilege and a great sense of satisfaction to know that Manhattan Country School exists, that its philosophy is what it is and is helping to turn out the kind of thinkers and the kind of young people who will lead us on the very complicated journey of making the world a happier and a nobler place in which to live in the future.

Harry Belafonte (2002)
Singer, activist, accepting the “Living the Dream” Mentor Award