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Roger Williams University School of Law

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Newsroom

Johnson Heads Black Women's Bar Org

Deborah Johnson, RWU Law's Director of Diversity and Outreach, has been elected president of the Massachusetts Black Women Attorneys association.



Deborah Johnson, Director of Diversity and Outreach at RWU Law, has been elected **president of the Massachusetts Black Women Attorneys (MBWA)** association.

Focused on the eradication of racism and sexism in the legal profession, the MBWA aims to help women of color – and particularly African-American women – advance in their careers. The group sponsors panels, community initiatives and mentorships, pairing seasoned practitioners with younger black female attorneys and law students.

Under Johnson's leadership, the diversity of RWU Law's entering class reached 25 percent this year, while the school's overall student body diversity stands at 23 percent.

“Advancements have been made within our law schools, law firms and agencies,” **Johnson said**. “But the numbers are not yet where they should be. There’s still a lot of work to be done. And MBWA is one of the best organizations to help in that effort.”

Johnson, who has served on the MBWA's board since 2013 and was its vice president in the 2014-15 term, is widely perceived by her peers as the right leader at the right time.

“Deborah is a silent leader initially, but she is very passionate about what she is doing and she gives 100 percent effort to ensure that the mission is accomplished,” said **Tiffanie Ellis-Niles, the MBWA’s immediate past president**. “I have no doubt that, under Deborah’s leadership, MBWA will continue to grow and make a valuable impact in the legal community.”

RWU Law Dean Michael J. Yelnosky agrees.

“Deborah is a leader,” he noted. “She was a successful attorney, then worked as a director of youth programs at an organization in Boston, and she has been extremely effective in her role here as Director of Diversity and Outreach. Her portfolio here continues to grow because of her broad range of talents.”

Johnson strives to be worthy of such accolades.

“I have a bit of an aggressive agenda for MBWA,” she said. “My vision and goal in the coming year is to increase our relevance and impact, both within the legal community and within the broader community we serve. I’m really committed to taking MBWA to the next level of excellence, while extending our reach beyond [the Greater Boston] area. We’ve got folks out in Springfield; we’ve got folks down in Fall River. And I actually think that the fact I am here in the law school in Rhode Island, so close to Bristol County, Mass., will help in that effort.”

Even as she looks forward to the work ahead, Johnson adds she is deeply grateful for the faith placed in her by MBWA members.

“I’m excited; I’m honored,” she said. “But I serve with an amazing group of nine other women on our board, and they are *all* talented, committed and passionate about the work.”

Founded in 1981, the Massachusetts Black Women Attorneys (MBWA) is a professional bar association committed to the advancement of justice and equality for people of color, with a particular emphasis on black women and/or women of African descent. MBWA offers its members a forum to share knowledge and experiences as well as focus on issues of importance to the membership and the community. MBWA also promotes pro bono activities, community activism, and the successful balance of family and career obligations.

Before her arrival at RWU Law, Johnson served as Law Clerk to the Honorable Napoleon A. Jones, Jr., of the United States District Court (S.D. Cal.) in San Diego, and worked for six years as a Law Associate with Mintz, Levin, Cohn, Ferris, Glovsky & Popeo, P.C., in Boston. She was Director of Youth Programs at the Boston Center for Community & Justice, and is a member of the Board of Directors for both the

Center for Collaborative Education and the Elizabeth Stone House, which assists women and families suffering the effects of domestic violence and other trauma.

Johnson is a member of three state bars: California, Massachusetts, and New York. She earned her B.A. from the University of Notre Dame and her J.D. from Northeastern University School of Law.