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2021

## Changemakers: Coming Full Circle

Roger Williams University School of Law

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## CHANGEMAKERS

# Coming Full Circle



Doris Adesuyi, RWU Law Class of 2020

### [Juris Doctor](#)

When Rhode Island Governor Daniel McKee tasked an array of policy subgroups with planning the state’s emergence from the COVID-19 pandemic, one of them – focused on small business – was co-facilitated by **Doris Adesuyi ’20**, who knows the topic well.

“It was a perfect fit,” Adesuyi said of her work with the group. “I come from a small-family-business background myself. It’s in my blood, really – the pain and joy and struggles of running a small business are totally real to me. So I understood what they were experiencing, and could relate first-hand to the creative solutions we were developing.”

The work also carried symbolic weight. “It meant I had the power to affect positive change for small businesses,” she said. “It’s one thing to be a business owner; but to come at it from a government level, to have influence over the policies being created and signed into law – that is an empowering experience and I’m thankful to God for the opportunity!”

Adesuyi joined governor’s team in April 2021 as Policy Analyst & Public Records Officer (working under McKee’s Executive Counsel Claire Richards, and Director of Policy and Senior

Counsel **Kim Ahern '09**). She is a member of the policy team that, in addition to actively developing policy, also tracks relevant legislation in the General Assembly.

Adesuyi's tenure, in fact, bridges two administrations: she first arrived at the statehouse last fall as a legal fellow under Governor Gina M. Raimondo. "I started off with just the legal team but now I'm a bit of a hybrid, a member of both the legal and policy teams," she explained.

### **'Your Daughter Should Be a Lawyer!'**

It's been an impressive journey for Adesuyi. The daughter of Nigerian immigrants, she is the second of three children born in the U.S.; her two eldest siblings were born in Africa. When her father first arrived in the U.S., he supported the family by doing factory and other work. In fact, Adesuyi remembers helping him as a child when he was a janitor at the statehouse.

"It's amazing how life comes full circle," she said. "In the same building where my dad used to clean, his daughter now works as a young professional and an official member of the highest office in the state. I proudly stand on his shoulders, and I am grateful for his sacrifices. "

It was Adesuyi's mother, however, who first sparked her interest in business. "She was the one who really had the passion to be a business owner," Adesuyi said. "It started when she would work from home, designing and sewing traditional African clothing for members of the community."

She eventually obtained a street vendor's license and began selling her wares from a table on Broad Street in South Providence.

"Oh my gosh, she sold so many random things," Adesuyi recalled. "That was a big part my childhood, seven days a week: 'Go help mom at the table.'"

From those beginnings, the family eventually moved operations to the local flea market circuit, and opened a storefront in Providence. Along the way, Adesuyi discovered another talent.

"As immigrants, my parents faced language and culture barriers," she said. "So, even as a kid, I constantly had to read and do my best to interpret complex documents for them, things far beyond a child's normal reading level – contracts, leases, legal papers. Then I'd accompany them to the lawyer's office to make sure they understood, that they got their thoughts across and that their rights properly advocated. The attorneys would always tell them, 'Hey, your daughter should be a lawyer!'

That seed germinated further during her junior high years.

"Our school couldn't afford many activities; we didn't even have a gym," Adesuyi recalled. "So one day one of our teachers took the top students and said, 'Okay, we're going to put together a mock-trial team.' No equipment needed, right? And we were like, 'All right, there's nothing else to do anyway.'"

Adesuyi showed considerable talent, however, winning a number of awards in competitions with other schools. “I discovered that I was really good at it!” she said. And she began to think about possibly pursuing a career in law.

“I knew the impact it would have in my community – the immigrant community; Black communities,” she explained. “Where, when you receive an official government letter in the mail or if you’re served with legal papers, it can be traumatizing, because you’re not as aware of your rights. But if you have someone there who can say, ‘Don’t worry, this isn’t the end of the world. There’s a process. Here’s what you need to do’ – then it’s not quite as scary.”

As RWU Law’s first Black alumna to work at the Rhode Island Governor’s Office, Adesuyi sees herself as a role model for her peers, as a “trailblazer and an example of the importance of the diversity and representation needed on every level of government in society today.”

### **Business-Government Overlap**

After finishing high school, Adesuyi received her B.A. in fashion design and merchandising at Miami International University of Art and Design, then returned to Rhode Island to sharpen her business skills, earning a master’s in Management and International Relations at Salve Regina University. But while she experimented with governmental work – for example, interning with Sen. Jack Reed (D.-R.I.) – she still expected her career focus to be on business.

Her early successes in law still called, however, and Adesuyi soon decided to fulfill this "lifelong passion" by attending law school. “At the end of the day, I still see myself primarily as a businesswoman at heart,” she added. “My undergraduate work was business-oriented, and then I studied business management in grad school. And when I got to law school, my focus was primarily on business law first and government administration second.”

She decided to attend RWU Law, and didn’t look back.

“Roger Williams really had it all for me,” she said. “And the classroom experience was just half of it. The other half was networking – with your professors, who are major resources; with your peers and future colleagues, through student groups on the local and national level; with legal and business professionals who visit the school from around the state and region. All of the functions and activities at RWU Law give you real opportunities to gain wisdom and make connections.”

Adesuyi was an active and involved law student. She received recognition for providing more than 100 hours of pro bono service to her local communities, represented the school on the regional board of the Northeast Black Law Students Association (NEBLSA), and served as president of both the Black Law Students Association and the Intellectual Property Law Students Association. She was also an active member of Phi Alpha Delta.

Adesuyi’s law degree helped her secure her legal fellowship with the Raimondo administration, which in turn led to her current position under Governor McKee. Is she disappointed that she has landed in government first rather than a business environment?

“Not at all,” she said. “It was a little unexpected, I would say. But while it’s good to have a plan, you also need to be flexible. You never know where life’s going to lead you. So when I was offered this opportunity at the governor’s office, I took it. And it’s been an amazing, gratifying, unique experience. I’m glad I can have such a positive impact on Rhode Island’s business community through my own experiences and perspectives.”

Adesuyi also notes that the gap between government and business isn’t as large as some might imagine. “I don’t see business and government as being mutually exclusive,” she said. “We are on the same side, pulling for the overall benefit of the state. They’re not separate universes; there are so many intersections and opportunities for real economic development and growth. And I hope to spend time exploring them all and contributing to the overall improvement of the state’s business community for all Rhode Islanders.”