



Yahnnes Cleary

'96

PUSHING THE DREAM FORWARD

From humble beginnings in the Bronx, to an impressive rise after Choate – earning degrees from Columbia College, Oxford University, and Yale Law School, and becoming a partner at prestigious New York law firm Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison LLP – Yahnnes Cleary '96 attributes his accomplishments mainly to the support of his close knit family. But second to his family, he credits Prep for Prep, a New York-based academic and leadership development program.

If you graduated in the Class of 1992 or later, chances are you know a Prep for Prep student. Prep for Prep recruits minority students from New York City elementary and middle schools, and after a rigorous 14-month academic program, helps them apply to leading independent day schools in New York City and boarding schools throughout the Northeast. Yahnnes's older brother, Makonnen Payne '92, was in Prep for Prep's first class of students at Choate, and Yahnnes was in the fifth. Decades later, the relationship between Prep for Prep and Choate continues, with shared alumni that have included Class Presidents, School Seal Prize Winners,

Alumni Award winner Kristen Clarke '93, who was recently confirmed to head the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, and Choate's current Dean of Students, William Gilyard '98.

Yahnnes recalls fondly how Prep for Prep's rigorous coursework helped prepare him for Choate, though he readily admits that it was a struggle. "The Prep classes were much more advanced than my middle school. I remember struggling with algebra and having to meet with my teacher after class to get extra help. But when I got to Choate, the work was much more manageable than it would have been otherwise." As important, he says, Prep for Prep gave him the confidence that he had what it took to succeed academically. "While I was taking algebra, my third form year roommate was taking precalculus. So that was a little intimidating. But the experience I had in Prep for Prep led me to believe that with the right training and commitment, I really could learn anything. In college, even though I was a political science major, I finally took calculus in some ways just to prove I could do it."

Prep for Prep also helped prepare him for an unfamiliar social environment. "We got a lot of advice from older Prep alum about what to expect at boarding school. And there were other Prep students at Choate so we could figure it out together. I also kept in touch with my friends at other boarding schools. They're still some of my closest friends today." The program continued to support him after Choate with help securing internships, and leadership development training.

Yahnnes's experience growing up in the Bronx sparked an interest in economic and social justice. Starting in college, he worked in local government and nonprofit organizations devoted to improving economic opportunities in urban communities. Even after transitioning to private law practice years later, he has continued this pursuit. "My law firm [Paul, Weiss] has a history of doing pro bono work on just about every major social justice issue in America, from racial segregation in the 1960s, to marriage equality, voting rights, immigration, and other civil rights issues." Yahnnes has worked on pro bono cases involving educational equity, affirmative action, and sentencing disparities. He also mentors younger lawyers, especially lawyers of color, who continue to be underrepresented in the profession.

But one of Yahnnes's most rewarding social justice commitments has brought him full circle: he recently joined Prep for Prep's board. "After the announcement that I made partner at Paul, Weiss, Prep for Prep reached out to ask if I might be interested in joining their Board. After everything Prep had done for me, it was an easy decision." Last year, along with another Prep for Prep alum, Yahnnes became Co-President of the Board, marking the first time alums have served in that role.

Despite the challenges brought by the pandemic, Yahnnes says that Prep for Prep, which operated virtually throughout, continues to thrive. In fact, he says, the last few months have made him more excited about what the future holds for the organization. "I'm amazed that more than 40 years after Prep was founded, its mission is as critical as ever. We've had so many shared experiences recently that demonstrate the critical need for developing talented, diverse, ethical leaders across all sectors of society. That is fundamentally what Prep for Prep does, and really what I think Choate aims to do as well."

For more information about Prep for Prep, visit prepforprep.org.

BY JEROME A. PARKER '97

Jerome A. Parker '97, a Prep alum, is a writer, director, and producer for the stage and screen with a focus on dramas and musicals.