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THE FINCH INITIATIVE:

Reconnecting Law Students to Rural Alabama

By Dean Mark E. Brandon, Circuit Judge Benjamin M. Bowden and Robert B. Thompson

Message from Dean
Mark Brandon,
Thomas E. McMillan
Professor of Law, Hugh
F. Culverhouse Jr.
School of Law at the
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When they think about careers, many law students think about Big Law in a Big City. That's understandable. The practice of law has changed in recent decades, and the material rewards of life in a large firm can be alluring.

For some students, however, the focus on Big Law can be shortsighted. Despite structural changes

in the practice of law, there remain fine opportunities in small towns across the state. For the right student, those opportunities can make for a stimulating and fulfilling professional life.

To remind students that it is possible to flourish in small-town practice, and to call their attention to some of the "hidden gems" of rural Alabama, I invested discretionary resources in what we're calling "the Finch Initiative"—so named with the permission of Harper Lee's estate. The Finch Initiative is a program that gives a rising 2L or 3L student an opportunity to spend part of the summer as an intern in the legal community of rural Alabama.

The inspiration for the initiative grew from a conversation with



Judge Ben Bowden of Covington County. So, when we commenced the program in the summer of 2017, it was only fitting that we began in Andalusia, the county seat of Covington County. With Judge Bowden’s expert guidance—and the good will of lawyers and public officials in Covington County—the first summer was a great success. It was so successful that we decided to continue there, with Robby Thompson as our second Finch Fellow.

We committed to continue the program in 2019. Resources permitting, we hope to expand the Finch Initiative to other parts of the state as well.

Message from Judge Ben Bowden, 22nd Judicial Circuit, Finch Initiative Mentor

In 1997, I left active duty with the United States Air Force. I was fortunate to be offered a position with the Albritton firm in Andalusia, which I gladly accepted. I had no idea at that time what a blessing it would be.

A few years later, when the newness had worn off and making a living practicing law was more of a job than an adventure, I came across an article lauding the virtues of the “county seat” law practice. The article was very inspiring and lifted my morale such that I still recall the pride I felt in being one of the lawyers it was describing.

It is my hope that the Finch Initiative will acquaint young lawyers with the notion that the practice of law in towns like Andalusia is both noble and rewarding. The contributions such a lawyer makes to his community are up close and personal, as the clients, opposing counsel, jurors and judiciary will be encountered nearly every day in some ordinary walk of life. As Justice Robert H. Jackson stated, the county seat lawyer “was not always popular in [the] community, but was respected. Unpopular minorities and individuals often found in him their only mediator and advocate...He lived well, worked hard, and died poor.”

Reflections from 2018 Finch Fellow Robby Thompson, third-year law student, Hugh F. Culverhouse Jr. School Of Law at the University Of Alabama

Excitement, anxiety and southern Alabama heat seeped into my car as I made the drive down to Andalusia this past July. I was unsure of what my seven-week Finch Initiative fellowship would entail, but as I have discovered, my instinctual, anxiety-ridden reaction to “new” is often a precursor to personal growth and fulfillment.

Once I crossed into the Andalusia city limits, I veered off the main highway and pleasantly noted the number of charming homes and historical buildings for such a small town. I was eventually funneled into the downtown square with a city block-sized greenspace at its center. The century-old Beaux-Arts style courthouse sits on the north end of the square, and a movie theater, sandwich shop, congressional office, general store and other small businesses make up the remainder of the square’s perimeter. As I parked in front of the courthouse, I was reminded that Mayberry and Maycomb still exist, just outside the margins of most people’s mental map.

I was not sure what to expect of myself through the Finch Initiative. In a way, my second-year summer

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mimicked the second year of the Initiative—both trying to refine a mission and identity out of a rough outline of limited experience and unbound expectation for the future.

In a phone conversation prior to the fellowship start date, Judge Bowden told me that his goal was to get me to the point where I could sit in on one of his hearings and be able to write an order. I knew that was a lofty goal and would take a great deal of observation and substantive knowledge of the issues on my part, as well as a well-functioning working relationship with Judge Bowden. Along the way, I found that the latter easily and naturally formed because we both benefited from discussion and debriefing after hearings. Judge Bowden would often ask what I thought about the credibility of a witness’s testimony, the policy reasons behind a statute or the potential exceptions to the hearsay rule which went unexplored. I felt a bit like a Little Leaguer taking batting practice off of Greg Maddux, but I think my perspective added value to our discussions.

Throughout the summer, Judge Bowden assigned several projects to me spanning a range of purposes and legal issues. Some projects were community-oriented. For example, I initiated the application process and created an action plan to place a historical marker at the courthouse to honor its historical and architectural value to the community.

Other projects involved communicating legal information for community consumption. I designed a flowchart tracking the

language of the Protection From Abuse statute. My flowchart was distributed to local law enforcement officers to help them properly identify eligible applicants for protection orders. I also designed an informational handout to distribute to abuse victims that prepares them for the process of obtaining a protection order.


Other projects focused on courthouse administration and functions. I combed through dozens of pages of data and teased out information and patterns regarding filings and dispositions in civil and domestic relations cases so Judge Bowden could more efficiently effectuate his duties. I also updated and reformatted a script used to qualify and empanel grand juries in the county.

I was tasked to research numerous legal issues, arising out of arguments made in motions, briefs or proceedings. Judge Bowden and I have even talked about writing a comparative paper of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Strangers on a Bridge*, specifically, focusing on the duties of Atticus Finch and James Donovan to their clients and to society at large after being thrust into the unenviable position of representing socially unrepresentable clients.

When Dean Brandon asked me to do more than show up for work and to treat my time in Andalusia as an ambassadorship on behalf of myself and the law school, I immediately connected his vision of the Finch Initiative to that of the Fulbright Program. I relied heavily on the recent experience of my

wife, Mollie, having just completed a Fulbright Teaching Assistant grant in the Czech Republic, to understand the challenges and rewards of representing yourself as an image of something bigger than you are in a community in which you are a stranger. I decided to say “yes” to all invitations that came my way, including to lunches and dinners, community events and even a parade. That mindset led to numerous fruitful professional relationships and many lasting friendships.

Overall, I found the Finch Initiative to be exactly what I hoped. It



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placed me in a small-town legal environment, extended my professional network, enhanced my legal writing skills and generated work product to add to my portfolio. I was pleased to find that Alabama Law School alumni were eager to meet and talk with me, and Judge Bowden facilitated those connections.

I left Covington County feeling connected to its people and places in a way that I have felt in only a handful of other places. I am privileged and thankful for my weeks working for Judge Bowden through the Finch Initiative. He shepherded me through a crucial time in my early legal career, and I am sure that I will continue to

benefit from his mentorship for many years. I am thankful that a program like the Finch Initiative exists, and I am eager to see it continue to grow over the years.

Second- and third-year law students at the University of Alabama may apply for a Finch Initiative fellowship through the Career Services Office. ▲

Dean Mark E. Brandon



Dean Mark Brandon is the dean and Thomas E. McMillan Professor of Law, Hugh F. Culverhouse Jr. School of Law at the University of Alabama.

Judge Benjamin M. Bowden



Judge Ben Bowden is circuit judge for the 22nd Judicial Circuit. He is a graduate of the University of Alabama School of Law.

Robert B. Thompson



Robby Thompson is a third-year law student at the University of Alabama School of Law. He was the 2018 Finch Fellow.

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