

# Creating a just society

## Melbourne Law School international visiting lecturer Professor Bryan Stevenson was a reluctant law student.

"I couldn't relate to any of it," said the African-American lawyer and executive director of the pro bono law firm Equal Justice Initiative.

A month spent with a human rights organisation as part of his law degree changed his mind. Professor Stevenson visited a prisoner on death row and it was the first step towards a career in justice. Today, he is professor of clinical law at New York University and defends people on death row. He has gained international recognition for his work creating justice for the underprivileged.

He has largely focused on advocating for prisoners and poor people and improvements in criminal justice.

Professor Stevenson's visit to Melbourne Law School to teach the subject criminal law, poverty and justice as part of the Melbourne Law Masters program has been a great opportunity to connect with human rights law experts on issues of importance. It also highlighted the issues Australia faces in access to justice.

Associate Professor John Tobin who also lectures in the human rights law program said: "Securing justice in the delivery of legal assistance is an ongoing challenge.

"Professor Stevenson's challenge to create justice remains relevant to all Australians in a context where Indigenous Australians remain over-represented within the criminal justice system and cuts to legal aid threaten the capacity for justice."

Professor Stevenson encouraged those working in the law to remain active in the pursuit of justice through pro bono work, even if they work in a corporate law capacity, and to understand the relationship between justice and poverty.

Student Carla Silbert said the highlight of the subject taught by Professor Stevenson was gaining an insight into his experiences litigating within the criminal justice system in the US.

"His strategic approach to challenging the death penalty and the imposition of cruel and unusual punishment of juveniles is highly effective advocacy and a method that can be adopted to challenge injustice anywhere in the world," said Ms Silbert, who works in legal policy for the Department of Justice.

She said one of the most interesting topics covered in the subject was access to justice, and specifically, an accused person's right to legal representation which Professor Stevenson highlighted in his public lecture.

"I learned about the way in which access to justice has been compromised in many American jurisdictions as a result of inadequate legal representation – this felt prescient to the current experience in Victoria and the reduced access to Victoria Legal Aid services for people in need. Inadequate access to legal representation enhances social inequality and increases the challenges encountered by vulnerable people within the criminal justice system."

Professor Stevenson encouraged graduates to remain optimistic about social justice despite the challenges.



**PROFESSOR BRYAN STEVENSON'S VISIT TO MELBOURNE LAW SCHOOL HAS BEEN A GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO CONNECT WITH HUMAN RIGHTS LAW EXPERTS**

"Law students come to law school thinking that they can change the world and then each year in law school they're being told how complex the world is, how difficult change is, how rigid institutions are. By the time they graduate, they've become hopeless. I think that's a problem. We need people who want to change the world, we need people who want to see the emergence of social justice. We need people who have the vision of a better way of doing things no matter where we are."

Associate Professor John Tobin will teach International Law and Children's Rights from 21-27 August (excluding the weekend). Places are still available for this and a range of subjects being taught in semester two, 2013.

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