

Committed To the Cause

James Forman Jr.

Title: Associate Professor of Law, Georgetown University Law Center
Education: J.D., Yale Law School; B.A., Brown University
Age: 37

It's not surprising that James Forman Jr. has devoted himself to the pursuit of social justice. As the son of parents who met as civil rights activists, Forman recalls meeting civil rights movement icons like John Lewis and Julian Bond, as well as other courageous activists while he was growing up in Atlanta.

"Civil rights was the family business. People from the movement were constantly coming through," says Forman, who is the son of former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) executive secretary James Forman Sr. "I learned that you attained fulfillment through service to others."

Steeped in the values of the civil rights movement, Forman has charted a path into academia that has demonstrated both a keen commitment to social justice as well as impressive legal and academic achievements. As an undergraduate at Brown University, Forman began thinking about the possibility of becoming a law professor, but the route followed an unlikely course. Among his most notable accomplishments prior to his Georgetown appointment in 2003, Forman co-founded the nationally acclaimed Maya Angelou Public Charter School in Washington.

"What sets James apart from most law school faculty is his ability to marry a real-world social justice perspective with a scholarly agenda," says David Cole, a Georgetown University law professor who has written extensively on the criminal justice system.

Founded in 1997 by Forman and David Domenici, the son of U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., the Maya Angelou school is a charter institution for at-risk high school students. For Forman, the founding grew partly out of his experience as a public defender in the nation's capital. Following his clerkship with U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, he served as a public defender representing poor and indigent clients in criminal cases. The experience showed him that even in the best of circumstances when he won clients their freedom in criminal trials, their chances for overcoming the poor conditions of their communities rarely improved for the better.

"I was feeling frustrated because I knew the people who needed the most attention and investment were getting the least resources, especially the kids coming through the juvenile justice system," Forman says.

That frustration led Forman and Domenici, also an attorney, to open a pizza parlor in Washington where they provided teen-agers jobs and skills training. The teen-agers, many of whom had been in trouble with the law, were required to complete a study hall period at the restaurant during the weekdays. The pizza parlor concept evolved into the idea of starting a charter school that would provide at-risk students practical skills, such as catering, while maintaining a college-prep curriculum,



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according to Forman, who has taught and served as an administrator at the school. He is currently chair of the school's board of directors.

The school's operation and record that includes a 70 percent college matriculation rate and a recently opened second campus has provided Forman a depth of experience that has proven valuable to him in the law school classroom, he says. He has been teaching education policy and law at Georgetown, and will teach criminal procedure law this semester that will draw upon his public defender service, which he continued through much of the founding of the charter school in the late 1990s.

While affiliated with a Washington think tank and with the University of Michigan law school as a visiting law professor between 2001 and 2003, Forman wrote widely for op-ed pages in major newspapers and progressive magazines on criminal justice, education and other social issues. Though his long-term goal is to write for national audiences, Forman is currently most focused on getting articles published in the academic journals and law reviews that will count towards gaining tenure.

"Georgetown allows you the flexibility to focus on a broad range of topics, which made this institution quite attractive to me," Forman notes. ■

— *By Ronald Roach*