



NEVADA TRAILBLAZERS

Meet Brittnie Watkins:

First Black Woman Elected to State Bar of Nevada's Board of Governors

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Last year, Nevada recognized an important first—the first Black woman was elected to the State Bar of Nevada’s Board of Governors. That trailblazing woman was **Brittnie Watkins**. While her election may be the first time she made history in our state, it likely will not be the last.

When we sat down with Watkins over brunch, she already had a full morning of kids’ activities, billable hours and a long day ahead of working on an extensive brief. She also had one pro bono obligation thrown in for good measure. Just your average Sunday.

Watkins has grown accustomed to a hectic schedule. For the past four years, she has worked at the forefront of some of Nevada’s most complex litigation as an associate at Pisanelli Bice. Despite this workload, she still manages to contribute significant pro bono hours and hold leadership roles

in several organizations. Add in three children under the age of 13, and it is no surprise that the question Watkins gets asked most often is: How?

Watkins’s resiliency and ability to handle such challenges dates to her childhood. She grew up in Michigan and is the third oldest of 11 siblings in a single-parent household. In high school, she seemed destined to be a collegiate athlete until a serious injury on the soccer field during her senior year left her in need of eye surgery, prematurely ending an athletic career. A devastating injury by any measure, Watkins did not let it hold her back.

Sports were not the only arena in which Watkins excelled. Her mom had a simple philosophy for raising children: education is key and you need to read to succeed. Watkins took both to heart. She has earned six degrees: two bachelor’s degrees from Michigan State University, and a master’s, J.D., LL.M., and Ph.D. from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. When asked how one refers to

a person with six degrees, she joked, “I’m just known as Braylyn, Brevyn and Brielle’s mom.”

In addition to education, Watkins has a passion for advancing positive change in the community. Like one of her favorite authors, Maya Angelou, Watkins endeavors to use the power of her pen to lift others.

During law school, in conjunction with the more academic pursuits of law review and moot court, Watkins served in a number of community-oriented positions, including as a public interest fellow, a student attorney in the Family Justice Clinic, a legal extern for the Children’s Attorney Project of Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada and a Kids’ Court School educator for three years, among other positions. For these efforts, upon graduation, she received the Barbara Buckley Community Service Award and the Roosevelt Fitzgerald Award for Outstanding Scholarship and Leadership.

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Justice Michael Douglas served as Brittnie Watkins' mentor and was in attendance when she graduated from Emerge Nevada.



Brittnie Watkins graduated from Emerge Nevada in 2019. Her family was on hand to see her graduate. Family members in attendance were: Barack Obama Burton-Watkins (brother; top row, from left); Brielle Moffett (daughter); Watkins; Brevyn Moffett (son); Antoine Moffett (partner); Brendan Burton-Watkins (brother); LaChel Burton (mother); Belize Burton-Watkins (sister; bottom row, from left); Braylyn Moffett (son); and Braxton Burton-Watkins (brother).



Brittnie Watkins and Angela Cook meet up with Watkins' friend Victor Ross during the 2020 summer protests in Las Vegas. Watkins and Cook served as legal observers.

Watkins' experience with Kids' Court School—a child witness education program—served as the basis for her dissertation. She examined the efficacy of the program through a multi-disciplinary approach, establishing its effectiveness in reducing court-related stress. Her findings have implications for memory accuracy and credibility, and align with the growing perspective that given the proper preparation, children should have a voice in judicial decisions impacting their lives. UNLV's College of Education awarded Watkins's dissertation with Outstanding Dissertation of the Year.

Since law school, Watkins has not slowed down when it comes to advancing positive change. After her election to the Board of Governors, the board formed a blue-ribbon committee tasked with examining diversity and inclusion in the state bar, its sections, and the civil and criminal justice system. Watkins sits on the committee and

looks forward to furthering its important mission. She also currently serves as vice president of the Las Vegas Chapter of the National Bar Association and as an editor for the Clark County Bar Association's *Communiqué* publication. If that's not enough, she graduated from Emerge Nevada—an organization that works to increase the number of women from diverse backgrounds in public office—in 2019, regularly acts as a legal observer for social justice protests and contributes hundreds of hours a year toward pro bono services.

In 2019, Watkins received the Access to Justice Award of Excellence from Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada for her outstanding work and results in a civil rights action on behalf of a pro bono client who suffered injuries while in custody.

When asked about Watkins, retired Nevada Supreme Court Justice Michael

Douglas, whom Watkins clerked for following law school and considers a mentor, reflected on her intellect, desire for learning, and passion for helping the people and causes she cares about.

What is next on the horizon for Watkins?

Along with raising her children and litigating, she plans to continue to use her pen (and her voice) to push the community forward. On her rare day—or more accurately, handful of hours—off, she likes to coach her children's sports teams or enjoy a good biography.