

Steffen Sowell in Texas Lawyer: Lawyers, Like Poets, Are In Unique Positions to Move the Country Toward A More Egalitarian Society

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Winstead PC attorney [Steffen Sowell](#) drafted a reflective essay in honor of Black History Month. He discusses the societal contributions of African-American poet Amanda Gorman, as well as how lawyers can move the needle in the fight for racial equity. An excerpt is below.

“Black History Month is unique in the sense that we designate this time period to specifically remember the numerous accomplishments and achievements that African-Americans have made throughout our nation’s history. Beginning in 1976, when President Gerald Ford officially recognized the month of February as a time to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans, this month helps to symbolize the country’s overall commitment to upholding that special promise. Thus, it is in light of this commitment, that we honor the transformative power of Americans working toward a more racially unified country where all can receive the honor and dignity deserved for their part in building this great nation. At 22 years-of-age, Amanda Gorman appears poised to follow in the footsteps of previous black historical poets, such as Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou, as she recently became the youngest inaugural poet ever to perform at a presidential swearing-in ceremony. Notably, this would not be Gorman’s last venture into national prominence, as more recently, Gorman delivered a powerful message of hope and inspiration styled “Chorus of the Captains” as a prelude to Super Bowl LV.

In addition to being an accomplished poet, Gorman has also been recognized as a distinguished scholar, having graduated *cum laude* with a degree in Sociology from Harvard University. Along the way, Gorman was also recognized as the country’s first-ever National Youth Poet Laureate which she accomplished at the age of nineteen. At first blush, one might see each of these outstanding achievements and think that Amanda Gorman was born into a life of privilege. However, such notions belie the litany of hardships which she has ultimately overcome.

Like each of us, Amanda faced many hardships and difficulties throughout her life. In fact, Amanda Gorman’s upbringing and early life circumstances would suggest that she would be anything other than the accomplished poet, writer, and scholar, which she is widely regarded as today. As a self-described “skinny black girl descended from slaves,” Gorman had to overcome a variety of impediments, including physical disabilities arising from complications stemming from a premature birth. Gorman suffered from a host of physical infirmities, which included a diagnoses for auditory processing disorder, as well as recurring speech articulation issues which made it overly burdensome for her to learn at a rate and pace equal to that of her peers.

Like poets, lawyers also play an important role in contemporary society through the pursuit of justice, fairness, and equal treatment under the law. In fact, lawyers are generally in a better position to remedy the systemic inequities and barriers which exist in society through their continued advocacy and influence before the courts. Concerning this point, the late Justice Frankfurter once observed that “all the interest of [humanity] that are comprised under the constitutional guarantees given to ‘life, liberty, and property are in the professional keeping of lawyers.”

The Texas Supreme Court subsequently embraced this axiom when it codified this precept within the Preamble to the Texas Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct Governing Lawyers:

A lawyer is a representative of clients, an officer of the legal system, and a public citizen having special responsibility for the quality of justice. Lawyers, as guardians of the law, play a vital role in the preservation of society. The fulfillment of this role requires an understanding by lawyers of the function of our legal system. A consequent obligation of lawyers is to maintain the highest standards of ethical conduct.

Not only have lawyers served as vital agents of change throughout history, but so have law firms more generally, having accounted for more than \$193 billion in economic activity arising from both legal and social services provided to disadvantaged communities. As vital components to advancing the public interest, legal professionals are uniquely

situated to remedy the systemic inequities that exist in a diverse and socially fluid public society. By providing essential legal services to traditionally underrepresented clients, lawyers ultimately help to make stories like Amanda Gorman increasingly probable for children of all backgrounds.

And so, while it is customary to celebrate Black History Month in February, it is easy to forget the underlying reasons for us as a nation to do so. As former President Barack Obama once explained: “[Black History Month] is about the lived, shared experiences of all African-Americans, high and low, famous and obscure, and how those experiences have shaped and challenged and ultimately strengthened America. It’s about taking an unvarnished look at the past so we can create a better future. It’s a reminder of where we as a country have been so that we know where we need to go.”

President Obama’s point was not only to illustrate the overall importance of having diverse perspectives and viewpoints within the proverbial workplace, but also to call attention to the fact that America has always been both culturally and ethnically diverse since its inception.

Therefore, while it is vitally important to recognize the importance of diversity and its role in ushering us towards a truly egalitarian society, Black History Month also functions as a reminder that our differences are what make us a more prosperous and more perfect union. Thus, even in the midst of an unprecedented global pandemic, it is clear to see that our contributions to the law and our communities are what make stories like Amanda’s increasingly possible for us all.”

[Read the full article.](#)

Steffen Sowell is a member of Winstead’s [Business Restructuring/Bankruptcy](#) Practice Group. After law school, he obtained a clerkship for the Honorable Chief Judge Bill Parker in the United States Bankruptcy Court, Eastern District of Texas.

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