

2024-2025 BEYOND THE BARS FELLOWS



AKIANA SMITH
HOMETOWN: BROOKLYN, NY

Akiana Smith is a native New Yorker and a natural-born activist. With a career spanning various roles, she has worked as a community organizer, educator, and facilitator of anger management groups for men returning from prison. Currently, she serves as the Community Court Manager at the Women’s Community Justice Association, a non-profit dedicated to advocating for the rights of women in detention. She is a proud mother of two empowered daughters, Aleyah and Lauryn, and is deeply committed to amplifying the voices of marginalized communities. Akiana is particularly passionate about advocating for women and Black communities. Her unwavering dedication fuels her ongoing fight for justice, and she remains steadfast in her pursuit of creating a more equitable and just society.

With a proven track record of success, Akiana brings both passion and experience to her advocacy efforts. She is a force to be reckoned with, dedicated to ensuring that every voice is heard and every individual has the opportunity to thrive

BALERY CAROLINA PEGUERO

HOMETOWN: BROOKLYN, NY

Balery Carolina Peguero is very excited to have been given this opportunity to express my gratitude for this amazing fellowship and for Columbia University where I am gaining a true passion for community healing and oneness with self and so many people who need a voice and advocacy. I look forward to this immense educational journey and most of all thankful to the most high for allowing me to be here.



DORIAN BESS

HOMETOWN: BRONX, NY

Dorian Bess brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to her role as the Program Development and Engagement Officer of The Social Justice Network. With 18 years of lived experience within the Criminal Justice System, she has transformed her journey into a career dedicated to supporting justice-impacted individuals through reentry services, mental health advocacy, and specialized care for women experiencing trauma and substance abuse.



EDWIN J. HERNANDEZ

HOMETOWN: NEW YORK, NY

Edwin John Hernandez is a man of many hats. Upon re-entering society after 5 years of being incarcerated, he became a Certified Recovery Peer Advocate and a Community Organizer working with campaigns from The Campaign to Close Rikers, Communities Not Cages, the Youth Justice & Opportunities Act, Clean Slate & Treatment Not Jails, alongside other coalitions. Edwin

studies linguistics and cultural divides, bridging gaps through community and local affairs and engagements. Edwin is a father, a proud New Yorker, and an advocate for the underserved community. He founded a non profit organization called, “Building Purpose”, serving the underserved throughout New York City communities with acts of charity and social benefit causes. His goals remain focused on helping others and providing assisted support to those who need it. Always eager to learn, teach and keep G-d first, grateful is his demeanour.



HEAVEN PEOPLES

HOMETOWN: QUEENS, NY

Heaven Peoples is a dedicated advocate for social justice and transformative healing within marginalized communities, especially focusing on Black and LGBTQ+ experiences. As the founder of Blaq Reunited LLC, she curates spaces for community building, expression, and dialogue that uplift Black and queer voices. Through her work with Girls for Gender Equity, Heaven has contributed to youth programming and policy advocacy, including initiatives for a police-free education system. She is currently pursuing a BA/MA in Psychology on the CASAC track at City College of New York, using her studies to deepen her impact in mental health and restorative justice. With a personal connection to criminal justice reform, Heaven seeks to dismantle systemic oppression while fostering healing and resilience within impacted communities with a focus on women and gender expansive folx.



IMOGENE WILLIAMS

HOMETOWN: LOS ANGELES, CA

Imogene Williams is a South Central Los Angeles native who has been residing in Brooklyn for the past 11 years. She is a mother, an artist and Pilates teacher. She studied Dance and Psychology at

Smith College and is passionate about work around prison reform and mass incarceration after witnessing her beloved brother serve a 25 year prison sentence. She hopes to use her skills and talents to help bring holistic healing to communities impacted the most by these issues and bring awareness to those who may not be as impacted. Imogene is a firm believer in the interconnectedness of all life and that there is no social justice issue that we are completely removed from even if we aren't directly impacted it.



JASMINE MERRITT

Jasmine Merritt is a sophomore at Barnard College, and plans to major in American Studies. On campus, she works with her peers as a writing fellow. During the summer, she interned at the District Attorney's Office in her county which inspired her to learn more about the criminal justice system and mass incarceration. Jasmine is passionate about restorative justice and is excited to learn from the Beyond the Bars Fellowship. She hopes to make a greater difference in the future by pursuing a law degree.



JON BURKE

HOMETOWN: MINNEAPOLIS, MN

Jon is a general surgery resident planning to specialize in trauma surgery and currently taking time as a doctoral student in social epidemiology at NYU. His research investigates the impact of city budget allocations to policing and incarceration versus services that meet essential needs on community violence and associated racial inequities. He is also the co-founder of two branches of the Health Career Collaborative, an after-school health education and mentorship program that serves as part of a pipeline for underserved Black and Latiné high school students to enter health careers. In addition to providing medical and surgical care to those who survive violence, he has begun working to expand

the care available to survivors of violence beyond the hospital through helping establish a violence intervention program at Bellevue Hospital. He aspires to leverage his research to increase the resources available to marginalized communities impacted by violence to build a world of abundance with a foundation of care rather than criminalization.



JORDANA SURIEL

HOMETOWN: NEW YORK, NY

Jordana Suriel is a proud first-generation MSW candidate at Columbia School of Social Work. She is a Dominican-New Yorker and is interested in international and the criminal legal system within social work. Some of her passions involve youth advocacy, equity in education, and working with system-impacted people and immigrants. Her dedication in equity is reflected locally and internationally, including her past work in New York City, Uganda, Colombia, Guatemala, and Spain. During her free time, she enjoys spending time with family and friends, traveling, painting, and exploring new hobbies.



MADINA P. OUEDRAOGO, MPA-PNP

HOMETOWN: NEWARK, NJ

Madina P. Ouedraogo, MPA-PNP is a Burkinabè - American policy advocacy professional working at the intersection of women, race, and criminal legal reform. She currently serves as the Senior Policy and Advocacy Associate at the National Black Women's Justice Institute (NBWJI) in Brooklyn, New York. Madina is an alumna of the New York University Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service where she earned her MPA in Public and Nonprofit Management and Policy. Madina is also a graduate of The College of New Jersey School of Humanities and Social Sciences where she graduated Phi Beta

Kappa and with honors and earned a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology. She is also currently a 2024-2025 Black to the Future Public Policy Institute Fellow and was a 2021-2023 Leadership Newark Public Policy Fellow and 2023 New Jersey New Leaders Council Fellow. Madina previously served as a Policy Coordinator for Governor Philip D. Murphy, advancing criminal justice policy in the State of New Jersey. Her past notable internships include the ACLU, ACLU of NJ and the NYC Commission on Gender Equity.



MARIAM OSMAN

HOMETOWN: DENVER, CO

Mariam (she/they) is still finding their way but is a chaser of transformative learning spaces (like the Beyond the Bars fellowship) and is currently exploring questions regarding the psycho-social impacts of state violence as well as pathways to collective healing. They are getting their BA in Environmental Anthropology and are interested in studying systems of CARE (clinical psychology, human and political ecology + permaculture + botanical legacies and usages). They are also a researcher for Barnard Center for Research on Women, CCSW Action Lab for Social Justice, and a member and facilitator for Field Meridian which is an artist collective committed to strengthening local food ecologies in Brooklyn, New York.



MAURICE L. WILLIAMS

HOMETOWN: FAR ROCKAWAY, NY

Maurice Williams is an altruistic perpetual student. He is the founder and executive director of A Father's love Personal Development & Community Services, Chaplain, adjunct lecturer, author, and noted hip-hop artist. One of his primary goals is to uplift marginalized young people and their family members, especially those who have been justice impacted. Maurice's current focus is outcome analysis and researching best practices to ensure that his organization renders gold standard community service.



MIKE JEAN

HOMETOWN: BROOKLYN, NY

Mike Jean is a Transitional Coach with Atlas HOPE at The Fortune Society, dedicated to fostering personal growth and wellness for justice-impacted individuals. He creates safe, transformative spaces through Cognitive Behavioral Intervention. Currently studying Humanities & Justice, Mike is a committed volunteer, contributing to initiatives like NYPD school giveaways and Fortune Society's community events. His poetry and art reflect the struggles faced by those impacted by the justice system.



NINA PARSEE

HOMETOWN: WASHINGTON, DC

Nina Parsee is a Sociology Master's student at Columbia University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, where her research focuses on the criminalization of women of color in domestic violence cases within the New York Family Court system. She graduated from UCLA with a BA in Political Science and a minor in Global Health. Nina's dedication to social and racial justice is deeply rooted in her identity as an Iranian-American native to Washington, DC. Growing up witnessing the impacts of over-policing and mass incarceration, she became keenly aware of the colonial logic embedded in the prison-industrial system and its disruption of community healing and solidarity. Nina is particularly passionate about the intersections of language, culture, and law in shaping the experiences of marginalized individuals and is honored to be a Beyond the Bars Fellow.



NOEMI POLANCO

HOMETOWN: BROOKLYN, NY

Born in the Dominican Republic and immigrating to New York at the age of four, Noemi grew up in diverse communities where the impact of the justice system on people of color and other minorities became increasingly apparent as she faced disparities herself. She is currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Political Science with a minor in Law at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Her experiences witnessing the justice system's systemic bias against people of color—through unjust sentences, the absence of restorative justice, and limited access to education—ignited her passion for political reform. Noemi is dedicated to advocating for marginalized communities and those who struggle to navigate the system. She aspires to become an attorney, focusing on promoting fairness and equity within all areas of the justice system. She looks forward to deepening her commitment to justice reform through her academic and professional experiences by working alongside those being directly impacted.



SARAH ROBINSON

HOMETOWN: WHINNYFOLD, SCOTLAND

Sarah (she/her) was raised in Scotland and has spent the last 16 years living in NYC. Whilst in Scotland, Sarah worked with young people in juvenile detention and having found a passion for supporting young adults, continued that work in the U.S in Brooklyn through organizing, advocacy and coalition building. She is committed to seeing the whole person and holding space for them just as they are. As a person in recovery, Sarah is determined to give back to her community the care, support and radical love she received. Moreover, Sarah has co-facilitated a number of youth based activism projects focused on examining the impacts of carceral systems and utilizing art pieces in engaging communities.

She continues to collaborate with currently incarcerated community members to assist in supporting their advocacy efforts and art as resistance through campaigns like [‘We Freed the Flower’](#), to call awareness to the need to reduce stigma, embrace healing, restoration and help us imagine a world without prison. She participated in the first ever documentary written and directed by a currently incarcerated individual, Corey Devon Arthur, ‘In Exchange for Flesh’, with Empowerment Avenue to call out DOC and their harmful and violent Strip Frisk policies set for release next year. Sarah holds a CASAC-T, CRPA, is expected to complete her Bsc Fall 2024 at SUNY Empire and will pursue her MA Social & Public Policy in Spring 2025. Sarah is eternally grateful for her community and credits them with seeing the best in her when she struggled to see it in herself and is extremely excited and honored to be a part of the 10th cohort of Beyond the Bars. Forever grateful to my family and Tyese A. Brown, Mekela Clarke and Felicia Francis.



SCOTT HOOKS

HOMETOWN: HARLEM, NY

Scott Hooks, LMSW, CASAC-MC, is a dedicated social worker and counselor with a Master’s in Social Work from Touro University. Selected as a 2024-2025 Beyond the Bars Fellow at

Columbia University’s School of Social Work, Scott brings a unique perspective shaped by over a decade of personal experience with incarceration and years of professional practice in behavioral health. His work focuses on providing critical support to formerly incarcerated individuals through counseling, reentry services, and advocacy. Scott is also the founder of New York City Teen Corps Inc., an after-school program aimed at empowering Bronx youth through photography and storytelling. Committed to dismantling mass incarceration and promoting restorative justice, Scott is passionate about driving systemic change through interdisciplinary collaboration and community-based solutions.



SHANNON MACCOLL

HOMETOWN: QUEENS, NY

Shannon has a strong background in communication and public affairs, with additional years of policy experience focusing on serving New York's veterans and their families. This experience was gained through her previous roles with the New York City Police Department, New York City Emergency Management, and the New York State Department of Veterans' Services. Shannon holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Urban Studies from Hunter College, a Master of Public Administration degree from Baruch College, and a Master of Science degree in Information Design and Technology from SUNY Polytechnic Institute.



VICTORIA KURTZ

HOMETOWN: NEW YORK

Victoria Kurtz is a licensed creative arts therapist and registered yoga teacher from New York. Victoria received a Bachelor's Degree in Cultural Anthropology and Women's Studies from George Washington University in 2014, and in 2019 completed her Master's Degree in Art Psychotherapy at Goldsmiths University of London. She is passionate about working with people of all abilities and backgrounds – spending years with children within The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Access Education Department, New York Presbyterian's pediatric oncology ward, and Special Olympics USA. Victoria currently works as an art therapist with NYC H+H/ Correctional Health Services, serving individuals detained on Rikers Island. In her free time, Victoria enjoys golfing, playing bass, chess, walking through nature, shooting 35 mm film and developing it in her dark room. Victoria's intention in this fellowship is to continue learning, growing, and engaging in work that transmutes grief into hope and healing.



WILFREDO LARACUENTE

HOMETOWN: BRONX, NY

Wilfredo Laracuate comes to Beyond The Bars Fellowship as a Workshop Readiness Instructor for Opportunities of a Better Tomorrow. He has utilized skills and education acquired during his incarceration, (bachelor's degree in 2019 from Mercy College) to enable him to engage successfully with community members regarding the issues relevant to impact change. Post-incarceration, Wil facilitated for Fedcap IMPACT in Queens, providing Reentry Transitional Workshops for people returning from prison. He also served as Mentor for the Justice Ambassadors Youth Council and the New Settlement Community Center, focusing on improving the lives of New York's most vulnerable youth, and ending gun violence. Over the Years, Wilfredo worked as a Teaching Assistant for Columbia University's Prison Education Program and has credited higher education in prison as a key factor in his own transformation.



YANIRA RIVERA

HOMETOWN: LONG ISLAND, NY

Yanira Rivera is a third-year Macaulay Scholar at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, majoring in forensic psychology and minoring in addiction studies. As an aspiring forensic psychologist and lawyer, she is fueled by a fierce fire from within and advocates for all with a belief that everyone deserves a chance to learn and grow from their mistakes. Yanira's leadership extends across campus as President of the Latin American Student Organization (LASO) Club, conducts research on police biases towards people of color with the research department, and serves as Vice Chair for the Honors Student Council. Additionally, she is an Assistant Facilitator Advisor for the National Society of Leadership and Success and participates in several other clubs. Beyond John Jay, Yanira interns at the Center for Educational Equity at Teachers College, Columbia University, and is a Teaching and Student Support Fellow for BreakThrough NY.