NEXT HUNDRED YEARS

100

Honouring our Communities:

Black History Month 2026

Welcome to our newsletter

BLACK HISTORY MONTH.

This year's Black History Month theme, Honouring our Communities, reflects on and celebrates the unsung heroes who nurture, mentor, uplift, preserve, and mobilise in their everyday interactions.

At Next 100 Years, we found that the most profound influences on someone's professional development can often be traced back to the simplest acts of kindness, patience, and recognition.

For many people, the law feels intimidating and out of reach, especially when they lack the money or connections to find adequate representation, or to even understand in the first place that they may require it. That's where communities step in.

The founder of Next 100 Years, Dana Denis-Smith OBE, emphasised this sentiment at the Law Society earlier this month: "law belongs to the people it serves."

We strive to celebrate and spotlight legal organisations and exceptional individuals whose work has centred on community and the provision of legal services to those most in need of it.

This Black History Month, Next 100 Years got in touch to interview several incredible Black women working in law, who were also previously part of our Next 100 Voices, our video series centred on featuring a new generation of women leaders in law from underrepresented backgrounds.

We hope you enjoy reading our newsletter, written by guest contributor and Project Coordinator Yusan Ghebremeskel.

Liverpool Advocates for Windrush



> **Our mission is to provide transparent and professional support to the Windrush community without financial obligation.**

Next 100 Years spotlights the Liverpool Advocates for Windrush (L.A.W.), which was established in 2023, building on co-founder Tonika Stephenson's Windrush advocacy work, which began in 2019.

L.A.W. provides free, professional support to members of the Windrush community in the UK and abroad, helping people who had the right to live in the UK but struggled to prove it. Moreover, it supports individuals who suffered serious losses as a result of not being able to evidence their rights.

The team advises on immigration status, helps with compensation claims and applications, and offers free trauma-informed emotional support. In September 2026, L.A.W. officially registered with the Immigration Advice Authority at Level 2 for Immigration and Asylum & Protection, expanding its work across three pathways: Belonging, Permission and Protection. This means it now holds the capacity to prepare and submit applications, make written representations to the Home Office, and lodge appeals.

The group is led by Managing Director and Joint Founder, Tonika Stephenson.

Tonika Stephenson is a British Army veteran and barrister (unregistered) and helped pioneer the Windrush Community Law Clinic in partnership with Liverpool John Moores University. The clinic received the 2025 LawWorks and Attorney General Student Pro Bono Award for Best New Pro Bono Activity.

Tonika's work focuses on opening pathways into justice at every level. L.A.W. has trained and engaged more than 30 Community Champions, strengthening legal awareness and signposting. Two recent law graduates have now achieved formal IAA Level 1 accreditation through L.A.W.'s clinical partnerships.

Tonika is also developing L.A.W.'s Clinical Justice Model™, connecting community experience, legal practice, professional education and systemic learning.

For Tonika, Black History Month celebrates those whose contributions have shaped society while recognising that the work of achieving equality remains unfinished. She believes women and future generations should not only enter the legal profession but help shape its future.

In Conversation with Marcia Longdon



This October, Next 100 Years interviewed Marcia Longdon. Marcia is a Partner in the immigration team of Kingsley Napley LLP, holding over 25 years of legal experience across corporate immigration.

In 2022, Marcia joined us as part of Next 100 Voices. Four years later, it was a privilege to catch up with Marcia and delve into the following questions:

"In your Next 100 Voices interview, you mentioned there aren't enough POC in the legal profession. Do you think anything has changed in the last four years, for better or worse?"

In our discussion, Marcia emphasised the powerful and empowering support that outreach initiatives have provided underrepresented communities, a privilege Marcia could not enjoy when she embarked on her legal career. She highlighted the power of these closely connected networks.

> **"Young people have more of an opportunity to access talent."**

Marcia highlighted the Global Counsel Forum, for instance, as an opportunity for lawyers to build strong networks and exchange professional insights at Europe's largest conference for underrepresented lawyers, founded in 2022. Moreover, the work of Rare Recruitment, Aspiring Solicitors, and GROW Mentoring equips talented students with the socio-cultural capital needed to navigate technical application processes.

However, Marcia also pointed to Julian Richard's 2022 1% study to highlight how entering the gated doors of law, and staying in the profession long-term, can sometimes constitute two different battles: the study found that out of 13,403 partners in the UK's largest law firms, only 90 identified as Black.

Marcia ended on a note of optimism: "don't be deterred by the lack of representation you may see." Ultimately, if we avoid rooms because no one in them looks like us, change will never occur, and inequitable situations will remain stagnant. That is easier said than done, but by stepping in, you become someone the next generation can see themselves in, and that is worth the courage it takes.

In Conversation with Marcia Longdon

The Black History Month 2026 theme is 'Honouring our Communities'. What comes to mind when I say 'community', and what role has it played in your legal career?

"Community is kindness." Marcia notes a truth that is often flattened and taken for granted. She explains that regardless of one's background or skin colour, the distinct individuals who remain part of your community for life are the ones who actively practise compassion and give back.

Marcia remarks on an individual of particular distinction in her legal career: her old lecturer, Peter Hodgkinson. Recounting the story, she discusses how his encouragement remains the reason she was able to do a law degree at the University of Westminster. Although she didn't initially meet the grade threshold to pursue the course she wanted, Professor Hodgkinson accepted her, and held unwavering faith in her abilities.

Almost 30 years later, his impact on her life as an outstanding community member persists.



Photo of Peter Hodgkinson, which Marcia shared with Next 100 Voices in response to the prompt: "Are there any photos that are particularly important to you?"

In Conversation with Placida Ojinnaka



This Black History Month, we were also privileged to hear from Placida Ojinnaka, Director at Black Solicitors Network.

Placida was also part of the Next 100 Voices series in 2022. She is a qualified lawyer and social worker, and holds regulatory roles with the Law Society, and the Association of Child Psychotherapists.

We wanted to share a spotlight story of hers after providing the following prompt:

> **"What was a moment with the law that has meant the most to you?"**

Placida's response epitomises what community is, and what honouring it looks like.

> **One of the most joyful and meaningful parts of my legal career has been mentoring and sponsoring Black and disabled women in law. One account that still resonates with me is that mentoring gave me the opportunity to share lessons, offer reassurance and help her navigate challenges that can sometimes feel isolating.**
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> **Sponsorship, however, required something more: using my visibility, voice, and influence when she was not in the room, advocating and championing those women. There is a quiet but profound satisfaction in seeing another Black woman succeed because, at the right moment, you quietly mentioned her name in a room she had not yet entered, highlighting her ability, endorsing her potential and ensuring that an opportunity did not pass her by.**
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> **Watching her confidence grow and her career flourish reminded me that success is most meaningful when it creates space for others. We do not lose anything by opening doors, sharing knowledge or advocating for talented women whose determination and perseverance deserve recognition.**
>
> **On the contrary, we strengthen the profession and widen the path for those coming behind us. This is the value and legacy that we create in leadership.**

In Conversation with Placida Ojinnaka



Photo of Placida on the day she was admitted as a solicitor of England and Wales, shared with Next 100 Voices.

“My encouragement to other Black women and disabled people in law is simple: be generous with your experiences and intentional with your influence. Mentor with honesty, sponsor with courage, and never underestimate the power of speaking someone's name in the rooms that can change her future and make tangible impact.”

Placida’s words are an encouraging reminder that honouring your community can mean practising inclusion: bringing others with you into the spaces you occupy, supporting them on their journeys, and making sure they are heard and treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

Thank you, Placida!

Previous Interview Spotlight

In Conversation with Stephanie Boyce

Stephanie Boyce made history in 2021, when she became the first Black president of the Law Society of England and Wales.

Born in Aylesbury in 1972, Stephanie completed high school in the US and returned to the UK at 19. In 1996, she began a part-time law degree.

After completing her training contract, she entered private practice, but it wasn't the right fit. Cuts to public funding then left her redundant twice. She was subsequently offered a role as a solicitor with the General Counsel at the Bar Council, advising the then Complaints Commissioner, her first in-house position.

In her First 100 Years biography, Stephanie spoke candidly about the challenges she faced as a Black woman from a low socio-economic background, including being told she didn't look or sound like a solicitor.

> ***"The more people told me I couldn't, the more determined I was that I could."***



She has since worked on projects with Ofsted and the Pensions Regulator, and given her time to her local community as chair of an education appeals and exclusions panel.

In 2019, Stephanie became the first Black person elected deputy vice president of the Law Society, and went on to make history as its first Black president and first president of colour. She is now Chair of The Solicitors' Charity, a Commissioner of the National Preparedness Commission and a Board Member of JUSTICE.

Stephanie Boyce's First 100 Years biography can be found here.

Previous Interview Spotlight

In Conversation with Dame Linda Dobbs

Dame Linda Dobbs was the first non-white judge to be appointed to the High Court of England and Wales, serving in the Queen's Bench Division from 2004 to 2013.

Born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, Linda came to the UK at the age of seven. She remembers the injustice of being subjected to name-calling as a child, often as the only person of colour in the room.

After graduating in Russian and law from the University of Surrey in 1976, she completed a master's at the LSE and a doctorate in Soviet criminology and penology. Linda was called to the Bar in 1981 and took silk in 1998.

During pupillage, she experienced blatant sexism: a clerk removed her availability on paper so that male pupils hoping to join chambers would get more opportunities.

> ***"Working-class youngsters... bring a different perspective and experience."***



Today, Linda is involved in training judges and lawyers internationally, particularly in Africa and the Caribbean. In 2021, she received the First 100 Years Lifetime Achievement Award.

Dame Linda Dobbs' First 100 Years biography can be found here.



Looking Back: Legacy and Leadership

Stella Thomas

Stella became the first West African woman to be called to the Bar by Middle Temple on 19 May 1933. Born in Lagos in 1906, Stella was educated in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and graduated from Oxford University with a law degree. Stella went on to become the first female magistrate in Nigeria.

Stella was a founding member of the League of Coloured Peoples, a civil rights organisation open to people of all races that campaigned to end the colour bar. The League ran 12 centres, published its own journal, The Keys, and lobbied for change.

In 1934, at a lecture at the Royal Society of Arts, she was the only African woman participating in the discussion. She argued that Africans must be consulted on decisions about Africa's future. She also spoke directly to Lord Lugard, former Governor-General of Nigeria, criticising his "dual mandate" policy for turning traditional rulers into puppets.

It was 1947 before Nigeria had its second woman lawyer.

Looking Back: Legacy and Leadership



Justice Annie Ruth Baeta Jiagge

> **"Injustice eats me internally. I get very restless when I come in touch with it.**

Justice Annie Ruth Baeta Jiagge was born in Lomé in what was then Togoland, on 7 October 1918. After a career in teaching, Annie read law at the LSE and was called to the Bar at Lincoln's Inn in 1950 before returning to the Gold Coast to practise as a barrister.

Annie secured an audience with Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, and convinced him of the importance of a free YWCA women's hostel and mentorship initiative, for which she led a successful fundraising campaign in 1961.

That same year, four years after Ghana's independence from Britain, Annie was appointed a High Court judge.

In 1962, she was appointed to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, where she was the principal drafter of the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1967. The Declaration called for public education to eradicate prejudice based on the idea that women are inferior (Article 3), and for measures to combat trafficking in women and the exploitation of prostitution (Article 8). In Ghana, Annie also played a crucial role in establishing the National Council on Women and Development, becoming its first chair in 1975.

The Declaration was a vital precursor to the legally binding Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979.

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