

What I Wish I Knew Then: Alvin Bragg

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Alvin Bragg is the district attorney of New York County, a position he has held since 2022. He previously served as the chief deputy attorney general of New York, and as an assistant U.S. attorney in the Southern District of New York. He has also worked as the chief of litigation and investigations for the New York City Council, and was an associate focusing on white-collar criminal defense and civil rights at Morvillo Abramowitz Grand Iason & Anello.

Bragg received a bachelor's degree in government from Harvard College and a law degree from Harvard Law School. He was interviewed by Steve Cohen, a partner at Pollock Cohen.

An Early Interest in Law

I did not have any practicing lawyers in my family. But growing up in central Harlem in the 1980s and '90s—at the height of the crack cocaine epidemic—I knew I was interested in civil rights and criminal law. I had a few experiences as a kid which pushed me in that direction. I'm 49 now but one of my first memories is of a shoot-out on my block, where the police were chasing someone who had a semi-automatic weapon pulled. And as a Black teenager, I had been stopped at gunpoint by the police. Those experiences really got me talking to leaders in the community and thinking about criminal justice.

A Formative Experience

I had developed an academic interest in the law as an undergraduate, and my experience in law school was also mostly academic and not at



Photo: Ryland West/ALM

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg smiles while leaving the courtroom after a jury found the Trump Organization guilty on all counts of financial fraud on Dec. 6, 2022, in Manhattan

all experiential, although I finally did a practical clinic in my third year. But my most formative experience was when I clerked for Judge Robert Patterson, a great federal judge in the Southern District of New York. It was truly a seminal experience. Patterson not only confirmed that the legal profession was for me, but he enabled me to truly understand the seriousness, gravity, and humanity of the law.

It was while I was clerking that I learned that if I spent every day in the courtroom, life could be great. My learning mostly came from how Patterson approached all the different kinds of folks in the courtroom. He treated everyone, regardless of their position relative to the court, with immense respect. In turn, they all respected him. Once, there was a man in custody who was

shivering and clearly in distress. Everyone in the courtroom was standing around, asking, “Are we going to just call the case?” The judge said, “Go to chambers and get him a jacket. We can’t have court when there’s no way he will be able to focus on what’s going on here.”

Another experience I’ll never forget: we had someone who was in violation of supervised release. It was the day before Thanksgiving, and there was a fair chance this person was going to be returned to prison. The person stood before the judge and said, “I came today, as I was directed to. However, I really want to spend Thanksgiving Day with my family. I promise I’ll be back here on Friday.” The judge had been on the bench for a number of years and had seen and heard a lot: excuses, remorse, promises. But when he heard the authenticity of this man’s pitch, the judge said, “OK,” and the person went home to spend Thanksgiving with his family. An interesting twist to the story: he showed up at the courthouse right on time on Friday morning. But the marshal’s office was closed the day after Thanksgiving; there was no intake. And the guy came back voluntarily again on Monday. Patterson never forgot the human dimension of the system, and it was an important lesson for me.

How to Approach the Law

Elizabeth Fine, who is now counsel to Gov. Kathy Hochul and who was general counsel to the City Council when I first met her, used to say, “Don’t let perfect be the enemy of the good.” That’s something that I think about when we’ve got to move forward on something. It’s particularly good advice when there may not be a perfect option, which is frequently the case. You have to figure out what the best option is; and sometimes there are just competing bad options.

Another great piece of advice comes from Patterson. He would always say, “If you do it right, practicing law is hard.” Beyond his words, he conveyed that message through his dedication to his craft. He wrote out opinions on yellow sheets



Alvin Bragg in 2015

of paper, which had all these eraser marks from trying to get the right word in just the right place.

On the Different Ways to Be a Lawyer

I think one mistake a lot of folks make is that they work with one or two lawyers and think they’ve seen the right, best, or only ways to be a lawyer. In reality, there are so many different personalities and approaches in the legal field. As a clerk and junior associate, you learn the baseline skills, like writing, analysis, and good advocacy. But in the larger legal world, lawyers’ styles are so disparate. Later, sometimes too late, you learn that there are lots of ways to do this work, and that you don’t have to be just like the first lawyer you worked with. Instead, it is good for young lawyers to understand that they can take bits and pieces of other people’s approaches and create their own unique style. That mindset gives you some room to figure out the kind of lawyer you want to be.

An Unexpected Journey Courtesy of the Attorney General’s Office

At Morvillo, we did mostly criminal work, but I also got to do some civil rights work and I loved it. I heard there was an opening in the civil rights bureau at the New York Attorney General’s Office, and I applied for it. I didn’t get it: quite understandably, they hired someone who had practiced civil rights law for a decade. But after

my interview, I heard that the former deputy in the civil rights bureau was becoming the head of the public corruption office. I don't know if I would have initially gravitated to that role, but the new head was very persuasive, and the idea of working at the intersection of criminal law and civil rights was very appealing. The idea of having a foot in both civil and criminal work was very interesting, and it turned out that the public corruption office was a fantastic fit. The path that I thought I was on hit an unexpected detour, and the resulting journey was terrific.

While I was in the public corruption unit, I worked on all sorts of subject areas. I did criminal antitrust, civil procurement fraud, and local public integrity. It was a mix, like what I was able to do at Morvillo. Doing criminal law and some civil rights work is what I'm about, and I recognized in myself that I'm a generalist, and don't like to be pigeonholed. Some people know they want, for example, to do maritime law for 20 years. That's not me. The value of working with people across different subject-matter areas and seeing different approaches is that one can learn the building blocks of good advocacy from a diverse group of people. There are some universal tools that highly competent people master; and they can come from across 50 different subject matters.

For example: I go back to a lesson taught by Patterson. He would say to me, "This is about a person's liberty. Did you read the case twice?" "Yeah." "Oh, did you? You know, let's look at it again." I think about that phrase and the judge's work ethic whenever I'm doing something relatively rigorous and difficult.

Gaining Perspective About the Truly Important Things

The more I practiced, particularly after doing a number of trials, I learned what's important and how to prioritize. I remember making a bad life decision during my time at Morvillo Abramowitz. I had only been there about four months and I was working pretty hard on a number of different matters, including a set of interrogatories, which

isn't the most difficult of assignments. They're important, but they're not the opening statement of the trial of the century. But it was a litigation document, and it was going to opposing counsel. I was a little late getting it to the partner for her review. So, to me, that interrogatory was the most important thing in the world at the time.

Unfortunately, I also had a family funeral that weekend in Washington, D.C. It was for a relative who I wasn't particularly close to, but my father was. It was his uncle. Yet I chose to stay in New York working, and said to my parents, "I have too much work to do." That was a mistake. Probably within a year I realized that my choice was foolish. If I'd gone to the partner and said, "Hey, may I do those on Monday?" she would have had no objection.

I had an internal deadline, which I wanted to respect. And I had friends who were doing all discovery all the time. Here I was, being able to work on an interrogatory, with depositions to come soon after that. It felt like I was being entrusted with a deep responsibility. But I didn't have a sense of the anatomy of a case. I just didn't have the proper perspective or the knowledge that most work assignments aren't life-or-death matters. And as a result, I didn't have perspective. I've probably missed a lot of other things in my personal life. Meeting deadlines—and expectations—is essential. But so is perspective and having the confidence to ask a boss if a deadline can be extended a day or two in order not to miss a family event.

On How to Be a Leader in the Workplace

Brendan McGuire, who just left his position as counsel to Mayor Adams, was my chief in the U.S. Attorney's Office. When I was leaving for the [Attorney General's Office], he gave me some very good advice: "I just need to say this one thing. It's going to sound basic. But you should always tell the truth to the people who work for you." And although I thought that was pretty obvious, knowing Brendan, I knew there was something deeper in what he was saying. So I asked him



Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg.

to explain. He told me that there are going to be really hard conversations that must happen with people who report to you. These conversations can result from a mistake or because someone forgot to do something. The biggest piece of advice Brendan gave me was to not sugarcoat your words and just tell the truth. In these situations, you have to acknowledge that the behavior wasn't up to the standard. He knew that I was not a mean guy, but he was emphasizing that being direct in your feedback is extremely important to ensuring that issues don't fester and worsen. The flip side is also really important: when things are going great, you should also let people know they are doing excellent work. At the AG's Office and here in the DA's Office, I've learned that Brendan's advice was really critical for being both an effective leader and manager.

On Being a Junior Attorney in the District Attorney's Office

The biggest trait that I'm looking for in junior attorneys is an interest in and commitment to public service. I love trials, but I don't want someone who thinks that's why they want the job. The job is fundamentally about commitment to public service, public safety, and fairness. And what I look for is judgment. We want to build an

environment where everyone is doing the right thing for the right reason.

For some applicants, that may mean a resume full of engaging in this work. For others, it may mean a resume that has none of that, but their course load will display their passion. We understand if applicants can't do unpaid internships during the summer because they have to make money. They can show us their interests through their classes.

Some applicants may come with very specific skill sets, which can be useful. But in our training, we'll teach you what you need to know. I'm interested in our applicants' judgment. I'm not looking into people's eyes to figure out if they're invested in the work that we do, but we have a process here that is rigorous and pulls out a commitment to public service.

I think junior attorneys at the District Attorney's Office are in a very different situation from those at a law firm. When you work for the District Attorney's Office, you are in court all the time and you see the life cycle of a case much faster than someone in any private practice setting. I tell people all the time that the junior attorneys, paralegals, and analysts are absolutely essential to the mission of this office. Everyone who works here is. They truly are the criminal justice system.

Witnesses come into the building and may see my name on the door. But for those people, in that context, the paralegal is the system, the junior attorney is the system. It's not the bureau chief, it's not the division head, it's not me, it's not the judge. In that moment, it's the paralegal or the junior attorney. So, I want the junior attorneys and paralegals and analysts to feel the weight of that; and also, to know that they've got the resources here to do the job right. I want them to know that, and that all of these interactions matter. I try to urge everyone in my office to think about that responsibility in every interaction; and for it to inform their approach to the law and the work we do.

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