



# *TONI JOHNSON SCHOLARS FOR RACIAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE*

*PROGRAM HELPS PREPARE STUDENTS TO HAVE BIG IMPACT IN SOCIAL WELFARE*

Athena Horton decided to pursue a master's in social welfare for one simple but powerful reason: "I see a lot of pain and suffering in the world. My core motivation is really just to help make someone's life a little better. I want to play a role in making the world a more manageable place to live in," says Horton, who was selected as one of the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare's inaugural Toni Johnson Scholars for Racial and Social Justice.

Launched in the fall of 2021, the Toni Johnson Scholars program supports students pursuing a bachelor's or master's in social welfare who have experienced marginalization and oppression and Ph.D. students pursuing research on racial justice. Through scholarship support, mentoring, and leadership and professional development opportunities, the program aims to enhance community, retention, and success for its scholars.

"In the School of Social Welfare, we have values related to diversity, equity and inclusion; social justice; and racial justice. One reason for the Toni Johnson Scholars program is to put our resources and our time where our values align. We should be supporting students in those areas," says Meg Pacey, Ph.D., director of the Toni Johnson Scholars for Racial and Social Justice program and associate professor in the School of Social Welfare.

To qualify for the scholars program, students must be one or more of the following: Black, Indigenous and/or persons of color; a first generation college student; have high financial need; be LGBTQIA+, be two-spirit, or non-heterosexual or cisgender; or have a disability or chronic health concerns.

Twelve scholars were chosen for the program's 2021-2022 pilot year. Throughout the year, the scholars receive one-on-one mentoring from faculty and peers, participate in professional development opportunities, and attend monthly program meetings. MSW student scholars also present on an area of social or racial justice. BSW students are qualified to participate in the program all four years of their study, while MSW and Ph.D. students may participate for one year.

# SCHOLARS SHARE IMPACT PROGRAM HAS ON THEIR LIVES

## // Athena Horton

Athena Horton has had people cheering them on their whole life. But the unique kind of support and encouragement they receive as part of the Toni Johnson Scholars for Racial and Social Justice program has been life-changing.

“It’s different coming from someone who is in the middle of the work and doing it, and saying ‘Your ideas are innovative and can move the needle in this field and help people.’ And those same people saying, ‘How can I support you in that?’ For the first time in my life I am starting to feel a sense of belonging. That in itself has changed my life,” says Horton.

In addition to pursuing a master’s in social welfare, Horton works full time as a special projects coordinator at University Health Behavior Health in Kansas City, Mo. They are doing their social welfare practicum at Amethyst Place, a transitional living program for single mothers in recovery from substance use.

“I have multiple minoritized identities,” shares Horton. “I am multi-racial. I am a first-generation American. I am non-binary and queer. I have a disability. So because of these intersecting identities and the way our systems are set up and have been maintained, I have had to work so much harder to get to the same place as someone else.”

That’s one of the reasons being selected as a Toni Johnson Scholar has been so impactful for Horton. To them, the scholars program not only acknowledges the lifetime of disparities they have experienced, but it also takes tangible action to help mitigate the impact this marginalization and oppression has had on their life.

Every facet of the scholars program has been a benefit, Horton says. The \$6,000 scholarship will help reduce their student debt, the mentoring is helping fuel their confidence and spark ideas for research, and the access to professional development is giving them a chance to network and learn important skills. Horton has embraced it all: “I want to be able to take in as much knowledge as I can. I want to take advantage of every opportunity this scholarship program offers me.”

## // Marc Veloz

Marc Veloz sees himself as an empath. Even when he was a young child, he remembers being able to connect with others, caring deeply about their feelings, and wanting to do everything he could to help them. So for him, pursuing a career in social welfare felt like a perfect fit. So did joining the Toni Johnson Scholars program.

“They are prepping us for the big opportunities that will come later in life,” says Veloz, who is a senior, and a first-generation Latino who identifies as queer. “They have created an inclusive space where we can learn from each other and be our most authentic, successful selves.”

Veloz appreciates how the scholars program has helped open doors for him to network with faculty in his area of study, and to connect with other students, from undergraduates to those pursuing their Ph.D. The interaction is helping him work through big decisions like whether or not to go to graduate school and what area of social work to practice in his career. And it’s helping him be more effective in his social work practicum with the Lawrence Public Library, where he supports the community resource specialist doing direct service and community engagement.

“To be in a program and connected to your peers, and to be able to go to them for advice is monumental. When I am in these stages of deep struggle, after a meeting with mentors, I walk away feeling that it’s OK. Everything will be fine. I knew this would be a space where I could thrive and grow.”



Athena Horton

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