



Amanda Johnson

Amanda graduates as a History major and Political Science minor with interest in the criminal justice and education systems, along with a strong belief in equality and justice. For the past four years she has been a debate teacher at a local middle school, helping her students learn how to write speeches, teaching them about current events, and taking them to regional tournaments. She has also served as the Curriculum Director for Penn For Youth Debate. During her sophomore and junior summers Amanda interned at the Northwestern University Center on Wrongful Convictions, where she conducted comparative research on different states' penal systems and on the school-to-prison pipeline. During her junior year she worked for ACHIEVEability and created curriculum for adults who are returning to college while working full time and also taught SAT prep to high school students. She is currently conducting research on the response of Black federal politicians to the crack epidemic of the mid to late 1980s, and spent last summer in the Congressional archives in Washington D.C. collecting research. After college she is excited to become a public school teacher through the Teach For America program. She will be a History teacher in Atlanta for the next two years, and plans on attending law school afterwards to become a criminal defense attorney and work on restructuring penal policy.

CAPSTONE PROJECT

“Death of a Dream: Black Political Responses to the Crack Panic of the Late 1980s”

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Walter Licht, School of Arts and Sciences,
Department of History

A new federal approach to drugs and penal policy emerged in the 1980s following a rise in the use of crack cocaine. These new drug policies aimed at crack cocaine dealers and users, who were predominantly Black, incarcerated large numbers of the Black community and have had far-reaching impacts for the Black American community. This research delves through the Congressional archives, bill sponsorships, and proposals of 21 Black federal politicians to examine what role they played prior to, during, and immediately after the summer of 1986 in crafting hard line federal drug policies that would go on to cripple their own communities. For the majority of Black Congressmen, addressing the issue of crack cocaine was not a priority until it became a national issue. It was only when the national media began howling for a federal solution that most Black Congressmen began supporting and proposing solutions, the majority of which fell in with the predominant swing in Washington towards a hard line retributive approach. Among these 21 Black Congressmen, few approached the problem of drugs and crime with a long-term community revitalization approach, preferring the more easily visible incarceration policies seen in the 1986 Controlled Substances Act and enshrined in federal penal and drug policy for decades to come.