Forman talks history of legal injustice

CHRISTINA CARRAFIELL | OCT 06, 2017
STAFF REPORTER

In a talk about his nonfiction bestseller “Locking Up Our Own,” Yale Law School professor James Forman Jr. LAW ’92 shed light on issues of race and criminal justice in the U.S.

The talk, which took place on Wednesday at the Yale School of Management, was organized by “Convening Yale,” an initiative which brings faculty members to SOM to discuss their research in intimate settings. During the talk, Forman argued that black communities have historically been treated unfairly by the U.S. government and law enforcement officials. He stressed that the challenges these communities faced, particularly in the 1960s, affected how they were treated by the criminal justice system.

“In the last 50 years in this country, rising crime, violence, addiction and the fear that they created, especially in black communities ... helped feed punitive impulses,” Forman said.

In particular, he spoke of what he described as a heroin “epidemic” that “devastated” black communities in the 1960s. Rather than treating drug addiction in black communities as an issue for social services, he said, the
Forman said that when he worked as a public defender in Washington from 1990 to 1997, “one in two black men” were under criminal justice supervision.

While writing his book, Forman said, he searched through library archives in D.C., where he found letters to black elected officials from their constituents expressing grievances about the “underprotection” of people in black communities.

Forman explained that in the 1970s — following the elimination of Jim Crow-era regulations — black officials were inspired to “make the law work and to ... respond to those letter writers.”

According to Forman, one of the greatest challenges that newly elected black officials faced at that time was that they represented communities that “lacked the resources to protect themselves.” He added that these officials wanted the U.S. government to “do for black communities what they had done for Europe after World War II:” reindustrialize and reinvest.

“[My book] is a story about African-American elected officials,” Forman said. “But it is also about the constraints that they were under.”

Addressing his audience directly, Forman said that it is up to leaders in the fields of business and management to introduce employment policies that treat the formerly incarcerated with compassion.

“We have to signal and communicate to people that ... we will consider you as a whole person,” Forman said. “One of the most powerful things you can do to keep someone from being incarcerated in the first instance, and then avoid being reincarcerated if they have been released, is a job.”

Forman highlighted a number of companies that already employ such strategies, such as Ford Motor Co., which he said “markets its internships to people who are in prison or coming out of prison.”
Forman’s accomplishments and considers his book “compelling and thought-provoking.”

“Forman’s talk underscored not only how business is affected by its social milieu but also how businesses affect society and can serve as powerful agents of social change and betterment — for instance, by providing employment opportunities for former criminals,” Baron said.

The Convening Yale initiative was started by Shyam Sunder, a professor of accounting, economics and finance at SOM. According to the SOM website, “Convening Yale” brings “exceptional scholars” in the arts, humanities, sciences, law, medicine and social sciences to SOM.

Marius Constantin GRD ’20 told the News that the initiative aims to bring speakers to SOM who “would not normally speak there.”

Forman received his bachelors of the arts from Brown University in 1988.

Christina Carrafiell | christina.carrafiell@yale.edu
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