

Volunteers Experience the Impact of the Street Law Pipeline Program

by Millicent Bond

“I have a heart for outreach to those with unjust disadvantages and the opportunity to uplift talented young men and women provides even greater potential to have an impact on both their lives and the community,” explains Ted Elmore of Hunton & Williams when describing why he dedicates so much of his time to working with students from Thomas Jefferson High School in Richmond Virginia. Along with nearly 100 other volunteers this school year, Elmore has signed up to do important pipeline work for the NALP/Street Law Legal Diversity Pipeline Program.

The NALP/Street Law Legal Diversity Pipeline Program focuses on strengthening the pipeline of diverse people who choose to pursue legal careers. This diversity program places law firm lawyers and other legal professionals in high school classrooms to teach legal topics. After learning about substantive areas of law, students are invited to attend a Law Day at their sponsoring law firm. At the firm, students participate in attorney-run mock trials, negotiations, and moot court sessions.

While at first blush the commitments made by volunteers seem minimal, in reality many of the lawyer volunteers spend countless hours ensuring the program is a valuable experience for the students. Attorney volunteers spend time in the classroom, develop lesson plans that are both interesting and accessible to high school students, and lead Law Day activities at their law firm.

The main focus of the program is, as it should be, on the students. However, the program also has a significant impact on volunteers. I wondered what motivates time-strapped law firm attorneys to spend non-billable time on a teaching exploration

that does not directly improve their ability to practice law. Although the law is a profession, modern legal practice is extremely demanding, and the ultimate sacrifice for young attorneys is their time.

In an effort to find an answer to this question, I identified some of the most enthusiastic NALP/Street Law Legal Diversity Pipeline volunteer attorneys and asked them why they choose to participate in the Pipeline Program. Their answers provided some insight into our profession’s commitment to service and into the desire of practicing attorneys to strengthen the pipeline of diverse young candidates entering the field.

While attorneys’ reasons for participating varied, most expressed a desire to show students the opportunities a legal education provides and to let students know that the goal of becoming a lawyer or other legal professional is attainable. Most attorneys recognize the notion of paying it forward and giving young students options in their dreams.

As Mildred Gomez of Bilzin Sumberg Baena Price & Axelrod LLP of Miami says, “It’s important for kids to know that attorneys come from all walks of life — even if they don’t know any, and have no one to talk to about how to get there, they can do it and there are people who can help them.”

This idea was reiterated by Melissa Pallett-Vásquez, also of Bilzin Sumberg, who described speaking with a female student after her firm’s Law Day. “I was approached by one young lady who told me that she was now confident, having spoken to several ‘real attorneys’ who were also from humble beginnings, that she could also go to law school and become a lawyer.” She further ex-

plained, "It was clear after speaking to her that our efforts through the Street Law Program were successful in transforming her perception of the legal profession as an unavailable career choice. ... She now realized that becoming a lawyer was an attainable goal that she wanted to pursue."

Walter Thompson, III, an associate at Hunton & Williams in Richmond, Virginia, held a slightly different outlook on the importance of the program. He described an interaction with a student saying, "Of course it will be great if he chooses to practice law in the future, but as I see it, the fact that we put another option in his head is what really matters." In other words, it benefits young people to interact with professionals so that they have a living example of what it takes to become a professional.

The volunteers' comments explain the importance of diversity pipeline work in our profession and explain why these volunteers make time to support this program. When working with high school age students it is difficult to predict whether they will ultimately choose to become lawyers. However, waiting to pursue diverse candidates until they have entered law school may limit our profession's ability to reach all of the diverse candidates

who have an interest in the legal profession. The goal of this program is to introduce students to the legal community early so that as they move through their education they will consider and reconsider entering the legal field. As Ted Elmore of Hunton & Williams explains, "These are incredibly engaging, intelligent, appreciative, and enjoyable students."

As we begin the New Year and you consider diversity initiatives, don't forget the impact pipeline programming can have on your staff and on the legal profession at large. A few hours a year may make a world of difference in the life of a future lawyer.

Millicent Bond is the NALP/Street Law Legal Diversity Pipeline Program Fellow.

For more information about the NALP/Street Law Legal Diversity Pipeline Program, including a prospectus explaining how firms can become involved, see www.nalp.org/streetlaw.