

American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division
The Affiliate

TYLA Increases Diversity by Engaging the Future of Our Profession: High School Students

By Siobhan Briley

The Texas Young Lawyers Association (TYLA) is doing impressive work to continue breaking down long-standing barriers to diversity in the legal profession. In 2009, TYLA's Minority Involvement Committee developed and coordinated two programs for minority high school students: the Central Texas Diversity Forum and the El Paso Minority Pre-Law Student Symposium.

The Central Texas Diversity Forum

The Central Texas Diversity Forum was conceived by Natasha Brooks, long-time TYLA member, Director, and Minority Involvement Committee member. To implement the program, Natasha reached out to Heather Creed, Assistant Dean at Baylor Law School in Waco, who agreed to host the program at Baylor. Natasha's vision was to encourage law school applications by high school students in Central Texas. There was a similar program in Austin, Texas, but the real need, Natasha said, was in Central Texas.

Students from several high schools in Central Texas attended the Forum. Kelly-Ann Clarke, outgoing Chair of the ABA Young Lawyers Division, spoke to the students about diversity and then conducted a roundtable discussion. Following the discussion, the students participated in three 30-minute projects designed by Dean Creed: a mini-mock trial, a debate on Affirmative Action, and a mock law school class taught by law professors. Creed was given the TYLA President's Award of Merit for her contribution.

El Paso Minority Pre-Law Student Symposium

The El Paso Symposium, which took place on November 12, 2009, came about because Cori Harbour, TYLA's Immediate Past President, was looking for ways to address the anemic rate of law school matriculation by Mexican Americans. Like the Diversity Forum, the Symposium's goal was to encourage minority students to attend law school—to help students in and around El Paso see that people from all walks of life can, and do, become lawyers. The University of Texas El Paso (UTEP) hosted the program.

Chike Okpara, Chair of TYLA's Minority Involvement Committee, welcomed the students to the Symposium. Roland Johnson, President of the State Bar of Texas, joined by Cori, gave the keynote address. Following these remarks, students watched *Vote America!*, a video written and produced by TYLA documenting the struggle to secure the right to vote for everyone, regardless of race, sex, religion, or socio-economic status. TYLA Past President Sylvia Cordona introduced the video, which came into being because of her desire to educate young people about the men and women who fought to secure the right to vote. Following the video, TYLA conducted a trivia question and answer session. Natasha said (and who could disagree?) trivia sessions are far more fun for the students than quizzes—when students know they can win prizes, they pay more attention and learn more.

After lunch, students heard three panel discussions. The first panel comprised local El Paso attorneys from various practice areas who shared their experiences, giving the students an idea of what it is like to be a lawyer. The second panel included University of Texas El Paso (UTEP) Law School Preparation Institute faculty and students, and addressed the issue of stagnant law school applications and matriculation by Mexican Americans, the importance of a greater minority presence in law school, and what students could do in high school and college to prepare for law school. The last panel, conducted by the UTEP Senior University Recruiter and Financial Aid Director guided students through the admissions and financial aid processes. Students were attentive, took detailed notes, and asked the panelists many questions about the legal profession.

Reaching More Minority Students

Both the Diversity Forum and the El Paso Symposium are brand new programs, developed entirely by TYLA. Among TYLA's goals for 2010 and beyond is to make each program an annual event, to expand the content, and to reach more minority students.

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Although TYLA does not attempt to measure the success of these programs with statistics, its contribution to promoting diversity in the legal profession is clearly invaluable. In addition to the programs it is developing for underserved high school students in Texas, TYLA produces short documentaries, which can be viewed for free at, or downloaded from, the TYLA website (www.tyla.org). Among the videos TYLA has produced are *They Had a Dream, Too: Young Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement*, and *Vote America!* Both are short documentaries about the moving efforts of ordinary people, many of them young, that opened the doors so minorities and women could participate more fully in all aspects of society. TYLA's great work takes this tradition to the next level.

Siobhan Briley is an Assistant Editor of The Affiliate and an Associate in the Gregory P. Joseph Law Offices LLC in New York, New York.