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Berkeley Law Gives a Boost to Disadvantaged Kids

By Keith Bowers

Dorian A. Peters was homeless by the time he was eight years old, living with his mother in a Richmond shelter. After sixth grade, he began bunking with various friends and church acquaintances. When he entered Berkeley High School, he says, he had an understandable lack of focus. And college? It had never occurred to him.

Yet today he has a shot at a job as a deputy district attorney with Contra Costa County, once he passes the California bar. What changed his course? According to Peters, it was the Summer Legal Fellowship Program at UC Berkeley School of Law in 2000.

"It gave me exposure and focus," says Peters, 25, a recent graduate of Vanderbilt University Law School. "When you grow up and your world is so small, you don't get that."

Each summer the nine-week fellowship, run by the nonprofit Center for Youth Development through Law, provides internships, mentors, mock trials, life-skills coaching, workshops, and a stipend for about 25 disadvantaged high school students from Richmond, Oakland, and Berkeley, says Executive Director Nancy Schiff. It's often the first opportunity for minority students to see people of their own race in professional roles and learn what it takes to get there.

"It's true for any of us--if you cannot visualize yourself in a position, you don't really have the motivation to do all the hard steps required to get there," says State Bar President Jeffrey Bleich, who has advocated such "pipeline programs" to increase diversity in the legal profession.

According to Schiff, the fellowship aims to prepare its young participants for college as well as for careers in law and government. More than 300 students have completed the program since it started in 1995, and about 90 percent go on to higher education. Eight are currently in law school, and Peters is one of the first to graduate.

"Pipeline programs across the nation should be paying attention" to the fellowship's success at helping students into higher education, says Amarra Lee, a program mentor who is an associate at Farella Braun + Martel in San Francisco. "It's a resource that's needed."

Bleich, a partner in Munger Tolles & Olson's San Francisco office and a Berkeley Law alumnus, says there are several similar law academies in California high schools, and those also report that about 90 percent of participants go to college. "If this picks up," Bleich adds, "it could be one of those transformative things for the legal profession."

For some who work with the program, it's already having an effect. Being a mentor "reminds you of why you worked so hard," says Lee. "You want the people who come behind you to do bigger and better things. It's really inspiring."



2007 Summer Legal Fellows Arjan Amiri (standing) and Reggie Jefferson conduct a mock trial before a volunteer "judge," attorney R. Manuel Fortes of San Francisco.

