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Amicus Curious

Let law students act as role models: lawyer

By Pat Milhizer

Law Bulletin staff writer

Stephan D. Blandin was flipping through the pages of his son's college magazine when he saw the story of a law professor whose students introduce inner-city teenagers to the practice of law and show them that success in life can start in the classroom, not on the street corner.

"Most law students, and I know me, in particular, when we're in law school, you have all these great things you want to accomplish," said Blandin, a personal-injury attorney at Romanucci & Blandin LLC.

"And most of us have some true desire to do public interest work, but you don't have forums. You don't have vehicles to do it in a professional setting," Blandin said.

So Blandin read about the program at Washington University School of Law, which offers four credit hours and has received plenty of interest from law students and St. Louis public schools.

An alumnus of the Chicago public schools, Blandin hopes that Chicago law schools will consider adopting a similar program to offer law students school credit to mentor high school students and prepare them for a mock trial.

Last week, Blandin's firm hosted a forum so that law schools could learn more about the subject. Representatives attended from Chicago-Kent College of Law, DePaul University College of Law, The John Marshall Law School, Loyola University Chicago School of Law and Northwestern University School of Law.

The program at Washington University is run by Kimberly Norwood, a professor who grew up in Harlem in the 1960s and became the first black student to be accepted by the Missouri Law Review.

Norwood led Blandin's forum and told the group that her law students work with many teenagers who read at low levels, lack e-mail accounts and have never been on a college campus. And many of the teens face social pressure to avoid "acting white," meaning that their social status could drop if their grades rise.

"I decided to figure out," Norwood said, "how can I create a program that will constantly put positive role models in front of these kids? And hopefully at the end of the day, they will say you can be black and smart at the same time. And it's not a compromise of your identity. And it's OK to go to school."



Paul McGrath

Stephan D. Blandin

Norwood successfully convinced her university to offer four credits for the seminar that, this school year, is capped at 16 students.

In the first half of the semester, the students have lessons on how race, class, education and laws can intersect.

In the second half, they're with the high school students. They start by interviewing the students for "law firms" that ultimately will argue a case in a mock trial.

The "education malpractice" case involves a high school graduate who sues his school because he's illiterate.

After the mock trial is held in December, the law students technically are done with the seminar. But in the first two years of the program, every law student has committed to serve as a mentor for one of the teens.

The program helps law students realize that many inner-city teens do want to learn, but their

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environment or home life doesn't always allow it, Norwood said.

For example, one of the teenagers lost his best friend to a drive-by shooting. Another teenager got pregnant.

"The law students actually see that these kids have a lot to deal with," Norwood said. "Maybe they're not thinking about algebra tonight. They're thinking about 'Where am I going to eat? Where am I going to live? How am I going to take care of this child?'"

"That was a wonderful benefit because I didn't expect law students who take this class to have to learn that lesson," Norwood said.

Though the program is too young to track its

success rate with the teenagers, demand is high.

"[Public] schools are calling me all the time saying, 'Please, please, please come to our school next year,'" Norwood said.

Blandin, 47, thinks the program is needed here, especially given that more than 30 CPS students have been killed this school year.

"If you ask any [sociology or education] professional how do we reduce drop-out rates and violence, how do we help inner city kids, every one of them says there needs to be more role models and mentors," Blandin said.

"We talk about a glut of lawyers," Blandin said, "and our glut can be used an advantage if we get young people involved in mentoring."