Legally Prepped
First steps for West Side school’s first class

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The 2013 Law Firm Diversity Survey
Aronberg Goldgehn talks transition to new generation
In Courtroom 1944D in the Dirksen Federal Courthouse, Delexus Prater pushes away from the counsel’s table in a leather chair meant for people twice her age and size.

She is the only student at Legal Prep Charter Academy who volunteered to give the opening statement at this mock trial. Her excitement about playing what she called “the big part” doesn’t stop her from being nervous.

She approaches the bench with hands clasped behind her back — a posture tip from a friend to stop her from rocking. The advice pays off.

Delexus stands up straight, calmly addresses the judges and “ladies and gentlemen” of a nonexistent jury. She tells them how her team will represent the plaintiff — a fictional black teen named James Daniels, who says a Chicago police officer used excessive force while detaining him after he ran from her.

“Imagine you are a teenager getting off work and a cop charges at you,” Delexus tells the court. “What would you do?”

Her two-minute opening statement points out Daniels had never been in trouble before. He was simply scared. That’s why he ran.

Delexus walks back to the oversized chair.
She pulls it into the table, catches the eye of her co-counsel and flashes a smile. She tilts her head and sticks out her tongue.

The 15-year-old lawyer-for-the-day is relieved. She did it.

This mock trial and five others like it in courtrooms across the Dirksen building on May 9 were the culmination of the first round of curriculum at Legal Prep.

The school, founded and largely funded by lawyers, opened this year with only 155 freshmen. It will add a class of freshmen each year until it enrolls all four classes — freshman to senior — in 2015.

In addition to their schoolwork, the first class studied for months on how to stage a trial — with the help of more than 90 lawyers.

Last year, Chicago Lawyer profiled the efforts of a network of diversity-committed lawyers, businesses and others who made the school possible. They will help raise $300,000 for this school year and next in order to close a $1,000-a-student funding gap.

This story is about the students.

The school, students and faculty said, faces numerous challenges as it tries to inspire Delexus and others that a legal career — or at least college — is within their reach.

That they can do it.

“I want to be a lawyer or an FBI agent,” Delexus said, one week after her mock trial ended with a tie that peeved all sides.

“But then, I’m thinking about not being an FBI agent. Because then my momma said I can’t talk to none of my friends and ... the FBI people are going to look at my background,” she continued. That leads Delexus to conclude she can only become an FBI agent “when I stop fighting.”

Sweeping crime and underperforming schools are inseparable in the area where Delexus grew up — the same West Side that Legal Prep calls home.

As the school’s social worker will attest, the environment features students who fear for their lives, grieve all-too-often family deaths, go home to drug-addicted parents and see school as preparation for a better future that

doesn’t exist — or at least one they see no evidence of.

Fostering hope in an area where it is profoundly absent is one of Legal Prep’s most difficult tests. It is also perhaps the school’s most measurable objective after one year.

Among the school’s to-do list: Change a culture plagued by fighting and apathy. Constantly rework curriculum to account for vastly different levels of students. Inspire kids to take charge of their academic careers. Teach Latin, veganism and urban gardening. Put 100 percent of them in college and help them secure scholarships and financial aid. Repeat.

If it is successful — and some early signs are positive — the school’s founders want to replicate the school in poverty-stricken pockets across the country. It might, they contend, be a way to garner interest in the law among minorities. In the distant future, it could help change the pale complexion of the legal profession.

**Unlearning a language**

To understand why Delexus fears fighting will jeopardize her future FBI career — a goal inspired by the agency’s Dr. Spencer Reid char-

 McKay estimates that a student tells her every other week about family members or friends who have died from a drug overdose or who have been killed. She has helped students grieve murders of 6-year-old sisters, shootings of 8-year-old half brothers and deaths of grandmothers, cousins and parents.

“I have a student whose mom literally over-dosed in her arms,” McKay said.

A first-time social worker in a crime-ridden neighborhood, McKay cries less now than in the beginning of the year. She has become slightly more accustomed to the student pain from violence and loss of life.

“It’s common for me, because I’m dealing with it all the time. But it’s definitely more than any other area or any other type of school,” she said.

The neighborhood violence spills into the school in the form of fighting among the students.

In the school’s first few months, faculty members who are part of a “discipline team” grew accustomed to responding to reports of fights ringing over the Secret Service-style radios curled up behind their ears, said Sam Finkelstein, a member of the discipline team, a law school graduate and the school’s co-founder and CEO. Fights or serious confrontations broke out at least once a week.

“Staff was on edge,” Finkelstein said. “And the students were on edge too, because if you’re in that sort of environment you don’t feel completely safe.”

According to students and teachers, fights have erupted at Legal Prep over colored pencils, hair pulling, a beginning-of-the-year popularity contest and — frequently — over insults lobbed about family members.

If two students are talking and looking at a third student 10 feet away, that can be a call to arms. A girl was expelled for bringing a knife to school, which she told others was for self-defense on her way to class.

This school year, 15 to 20 students faced expulsion hearings, often due to fighting, said Rather Stanton, a lawyer and co-founder of the school. Most were allowed to stay, which is

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rare among Chicago Public Schools, according to Eve Rips, a lawyer who represented a Legal Prep student at a hearing, which she has done many times at other schools.

At Legal Prep, expulsion hearings “feel a lot like a small trial, essentially,” said Rips, a civil rights fellow at Chicago Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law Inc.

“Attorneys, if they come, can do opening and closing statements and can cross-examine students. What most charters and suburban schools do feels a lot less formal and less trial-like.”

Mike Ramser, who teaches Introduction to Law through Literature, said violence is a language students know. They speak it by fighting.

“It takes a long time to unlearn a language,” he said.

The philosophy of not fighting

When asked about Delexus’ concerns that fighting could limit her future, McKay, the school’s social worker, said she has told the lead counsel for the fictional James Daniels that there are better ways to resolve conflict than throwing punches.

“We’ve been bumping heads all year about the philosophy of not fighting,” McKay said.

“She’s grown a lot since the beginning of the year.”

Delexus said she got the message after nearly being expelled for a fight. A hearing resulted in a suspension, and she now understands there are different rules inside and outside the school.

She said she won’t fight inside again. But she’s worried about her FBI career because she said she can’t control the fighting outside Legal Prep’s doors. She doesn’t really want to fight anywhere. She wishes that the rules inside the school could be the same as outside.

“You can’t back down, because then you’ll be a punk,” Delexus said. “They’re gonna peer pressure you and then you’re gonna want to do it.”

But that, Delexus said, is not the case for students inside Legal Prep.

“They don’t think they’re in danger,” she said. “There don’t be too many fights here. There only fights if you messin’ with their family. That’s why they be fighting. Other than that, there don’t be too many fights.”

In the beginning of the year, it was common practice for students to circle around fights and cheer them on, teachers and faculty said. Now, students are more apt to break them up. And sometimes before punches are ever thrown, teachers said students will call for mediation — an alternative dispute resolution service offered by faculty, including Sheila Maloney, Finkelstein’s wife and the former assistant director for the Center on Negotiation and Mediation at Northwestern University School of Law.

Finkelstein said changing the fighting culture is one of the biggest success stories of Legal Prep’s first year. The radio curled behind his ear is much quieter now, he said, and it no longer elicits police scanner-level anxiety.

“We have an institution in West Garfield Park where violence and bullying are not the norm, where that’s the exception — I think that’s a huge victory,” he said.

Even if students wish the philosophy of not fighting inside school carried over to the streets, teachers advise against thinking that is the case.

Calling for mediation would likely end poorly in a situation where two girls walking home are surrounded by 30 people looking for a fight or worse — a scenario McKay said happened this year. In that case, the students tried to run, but had to fight instead.

“I feel like they’ve really learned the skill to sit down and talk things through,” McKay said. “Unfortunately, I don’t think they’re carrying that on over to the street life, just because they’re facing some pretty serious stuff.”

I had that one coming

Among educators, there are many philosophical questions about how discipline and learning should interact.

One debate examined many times at Legal Prep: Is it more effective to command a culture of discipline first and foremost or should that discipline come as a result of inspiring kids to learn? Should you lead the kids to discipline? Or should you let them find it?

Finkelstein said there are arguments for both sides. But due to the wide range of students’ abilities and the many who come to Legal Prep trailing national academic standards, discipline comes first at Legal Prep.

“Frankly, we don’t have the time to waste,” he said. “If we’re talking about freshmen, we can’t stand by for a year or two and wait for them to develop this sort of intrinsic desire to learn. We don’t have that time if we want to make up the academic deficits we’re talking about.”

To do that, the school uses a discipline system of “demerits” and “LaSalles.”

LaSalles are for academic misbehaviors such as being late to class. They’re named after the city street and feature the motto that professionals who work on LaSalle Street “don’t leave until the job is done.”

The basic principle behind how many demerits each wrong behavior warrants is a ranking system based on how willing students are to do that behavior. For example, because students here like “hot chips” more than regular chips, getting caught out of the cafeteria with spicy snacks nets you four demerits. Less-popular salty chips get two. Chewing gum is big among the students but not the school, so that’s four demerits — the amount that earns a three-hour detention on a Friday.
Monty (left) wants to be successful enough to move his family out of the West Side. Delexus (center) hopes to one day become an FBI agent. Mariah (right) stayed after school three days straight studying for an ACT prep exam. Their school aims to find a way to get them — and the 352 other members of their freshman class — to college.

“It’s amazing how many people still try to chew gum,” Finkelstein said.

Lenardo Latham, a 16-year-old at Legal Prep, summed up the discipline system this way: "It just gives me less room to do stupid stuff.”

And by his own account, he needed less room. In eighth grade, he said, he often swore at teachers. He started food fights. He didn’t care about school at John Hay Elementary. He said he took it “as a joke.”

When he heard about the rules at Legal Prep, he didn’t want to attend. Repeating his John Hay track record at Legal Prep would have made it a tough place to succeed, he said.

“But then I thought this might actually be good for me,” he said.

He applied, got in and now goes there. But even with Legal Prep’s three-hour-long detentions, it still took him some time to quit doing what he called “stupid stuff.” He said he received 60 detentions at Legal Prep this year. That amount means he will retake at least some freshman classes next year.

“I was angry (about having to retake classes), but yet, I was like, ‘I had that one coming’,” Lenardo said.

“Because that’s my fault. I did the stupid stuff. I got the 60 detentions. That was completely my fault. And I learned that now. Next year, I’m going all out. I’m doing the best I can not to get any type of demerit or detention. I’m doing all my work. Because I really do like Legal Prep. I really do. I could actually see myself graduating from it.”

‘Bopping’ to Springsteen

Accepting Legal Prep’s disciplined approach was a big factor in many students’ success this year. Lenardo and Delexus both said once they accepted the strict rules, they started doing better in class.

The school takes another approach to develop, as Finkelstein puts it, an “intrinsic desire to learn” — cultivating personal relationships between students and teachers.

One area those bonds are formed is an urban garden squeezed into what feels like an alley between the school and a neighboring church.

In 3-foot-tall, quarter-circle plant beds bolted together in circles and S-shapes, grow a handful of plants — strawberries, chard, lettuce and carrots. They are cultivated by students and Logan Bolinger, an unlikely presence at the school (he started as the night security man) who will be a teacher next year.

As a thin, white man with a master’s degree who lists “Huckleberry Finn” and David Foster Wallace’s “Infinite Jest” as his favorite books, Bolinger is an unlikely match for the students.

But by many accounts, “Mr. B” — like many other teachers at Legal Prep and elsewhere — has formed deep bonds with students.

Delexus, when Mr. B unexpectedly walked in on a conversation, said he is her favorite faculty member at the school.

“He knows, like, what I like to do, what makes me mad, what keeps me calm,” Delexus said. “Mr. B be listenin’.”

In his “advisory,” Mr. B said he takes a probing approach to teaching his students. An advisory is a group of students assigned to a class with a teacher twice a day in a less-structured environment where many personal connections are meant to be formed.

“I just throw everything against the wall and see what sticks,” he said.

One unlikely sticking point has been Bruce Springsteen. After his students said they had never heard of the Philadelphia rocker, Bolinger threw on “Born in the USA” and explained what the singer stood for — fighting against oppression and not being afraid to be yourself. He thought those messages could resonate with his students.

When he turned around, he found one of his advisory students performing a “bopping” dance — a move that involves quickly unlocking and locking the knees. Finkelstein, the school’s CEO, then walked in to find Bolinger and Stanton, a co-teacher with Bolinger’s advisory, in a state of shock. Laughter soon overcame the surprise as several students “bopped” to Springsteen.

“Advisory is the space where we’re trying to develop this connection between at least one staff member in the building and the kids,” Finkelstein said, talking in the urban garden with Stanton and Bolinger.

“And so that’s why this sort of thing is totally acceptable. I walked in when you guys were bopping to Springsteen. And I was like, whatever. ... Because you show me a kid who is struggling here and you’re probably looking at a kid who does not trust somebody or doesn’t have a really strong relationship.”

Miles, the student who started the bopping, at one point earned at least 32 detentions. That means he will repeat at least a portion of freshman year. But since being placed into a credit recovery program a few months ago, he has received no detentions.

“He’s bragging to me about his demerit
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sheet that only has one demerit on it for a two-week period,” Bolinger, a vegan, said. “He’s showing me his grades and talking about defending veganism in public.”

‘I know what’s right from wrong’

Legal Prep will most likely struggle against the culture of fighting for a long time. As the school fills up, the faculty hopes incoming freshmen will take anti-violence cues from sophomores, juniors and seniors. But the school also needs to stack up academically.

The next point at which Legal Prep can judge itself on that score will be the Explore test — a standardized prep for the ACT exam its students took May 30.

Consider Mariah Davis, who other students called a “secret weapon” after her closing argument helped her team win one of the mock trials in early May. She said she was nervous a week before the exam.

“I don’t like testing, period,” Davis said. “Because if I study, I still get a bad grade. If I don’t study, I get a medium-sized grade. But if I know it (in class), I get an A. There’s something fishy about that.”

She does well in class and she tries hard on tests, she said. She planned to stay after school three days straight the week before the exam.

Still, it is impossible at this moment to know whether Legal Prep will finish its ambitious checklist. Even if it does send the entire first freshman class to college, its goal is to repeat the trick with the next freshman class, the one after that, the one after that and so on.

Blending West Garfield Park’s complexion into the legal field will take a long time.

So the school’s goals are more immediate.

“If we don’t do well in this first building with this first school, those other goals are never going to happen,” Finkelstein said.

“Short-term, we have to focus on making this the best educational institution it can be so that we have something that’s worth replicating.”

Monty Williams was inspired to go to Legal Prep by his mother’s criminal justice degree — ahead of a host of other school options. He wants to graduate and follow in her footsteps. He’s already picked out his college — Miami University in Ohio.

Monty, wiry with dreadlocks and a firm handshake — perhaps a result of seven years in a gym learning how to box — said he embraced Legal Prep from Day One. It’s a big part of the plan he said he has to graduate from college and move his family out of the West Side.

“I’m surprised that we have a law-themed school in Chicago and I’m able to attend as one of the first. That’s a pretty good experience for me,” he said.

When asked if it was hard for him to stay out of fights, he said — simply — “no.” Two reasons: He only leaves his home with a set destination and he doesn’t fall victim to peer pressure.

“I know what’s right from wrong. And I make conscious decisions,” Monty said.

“That’s the crucial mistake that a lot of students make: Goofin’ around in high school. … A lot of kids slack off for the first and second quarter and then once it’s the third quarter they realize, ‘Oh I got to get my head in the books.’ Well, you can possibly come out with a C average. I don’t want to be average. I want to exceed and succeed. That’s just my motto.”

Monty and Legal Prep’s alike. ■

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