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An Ethic of Service: Students of Color Celebrate Achievements

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An Ethic of Service

Students of color celebrate achievements

You are role models, whether you like it or not. Whether you want that responsibility or not, it is there. Conduct yourself in a way that you would want others to be proud of."

That was the challenge from Hon. Robert T. Russell Jr., the Buffalo City Court judge who was keynote speaker at the Students of Color Recognition Dinner.

Held at the University Inn and Conference Center, the dinner was a celebration of the graduating students' achievements, and included the traditional "passing the torch" candle-lighting ceremony. It was attended by about 100 people.

Judge Russell spoke to a topic on so many lawyers' minds these days — the reputation of the legal profession and how it can be resuscitated — in a rousing 30-minute address.

"The changed perception of lawyers concerns me as a judge," he said. "What we observe on television in Los Angeles (in the O.J. Simpson trial) and the conduct of the lawyers involved — as a word of advice, please do not adopt all of the conduct observed."

Russell, noting that 80 percent of legal malpractice claims arise from poor client relations and poor communications, pleaded for a new ethic of service in the profession.

"A client," he said, "is not some inert object. A client is not just some dollar sign, but a person who is looking to you for guidance. When you get your license, it's going to say 'attorney

and counselor at law.' Not only are you an attorney, you're also a counselor."

And good service makes financial sense as well, he pointed out, saying that more than three-quarters of new legal business comes either directly from existing clients or by referral

Drawing on his daily experience in City Court, Judge Russell spoke eloquently about social conditions that lawyers can help remedy, both in the profession and as citizens.

"Drugs have infected and infested our cities. We're losing the war on drugs," he said. "What I see now is



Left to right: Mirna E. Martinez '95, Mindy J. Birman '95, Cynthia C. Valderrey '95, Maria Gonzalez-Brewster '95 and Hector Figueroa '95.

from an existing client.

Russell pleaded with the soon-to-be graduates to prepare thoroughly for court appearances. "As our up-and-coming lawyers for the future, one of your greatest assets will be preparation," he said. "Even if you've just received your license, at a minimum, please be prepared. Cases will move along more easily, and the public perception of lawyers in general will be improved by this. And if nothing else," he joked, "you'll make my job easier."

young people — 16, 22, 24 — and they're arrested in good proportion for drugs and guns. ... You have a responsibility to our profession, but you also have a responsibility to bring about change."

Russell quoted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." And he urged the graduating students to do some pro bono work: "Do you have to be mandated to do it, to help someone along who needs help?"

Such efforts have been rewarding for him, Judge Russell said. He spoke of a troubled 8-year-old boy whom he befriended through the Big Brother program when he lived in Ohio. "And I'm happy to say," the judge reported, "that he just graduated from college."

Professor Jacob D. Hyman also spoke briefly, celebrating the diversity that the student associations involved in the dinner have brought to the Law School. The dinner is a joint effort of the Asian American Law Students Association, the Black Law Students Association, the Latin American Law Students Association and the Native American Law Students Association.

"The law is not just a set of rules," Hyman said. "It's a growing, living thing on which people's attitudes have an influence."

Professor David Engel was then honored with the second Jacob D. Hyman Faculty Service Award, given in recognition of his support of the Law School's Legal Methods Program. This program provides faculty and administrative support to minority students at UB Law.

"It's an honor," Engel said, "to receive an award like this from a group I admire and enjoy as much as I admire and enjoy this group."

An extended period of student awards followed — honorifics given to the graduating third-year students by each of the sponsoring organizations.

The evening's opening and closing was provided by Norman Jacobs, a member of the Mohawk Nation, whose words were drawn from traditional Haudenosaunee rites. ■



Grant W. Jonathan '96 and Corlette V. Trim '96

Students participate in candle-lighting ceremony

