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Law School Report

Students of color told race still matters



Werten F.W. Bellamy Jr., Angela N. Jones '01 and U.S. Attorney for the Western District of New York Michael A. Battle '81.

Meritocracy is a fallacy. Mentors are for kids. Even in the legal profession, race matters. Werten F.W. Bellamy Jr. is not a man to mince words. And that is precisely why he was chosen to be the keynote speaker at UB Law School's Students of Color Recognition Dinner. After being subjected to "promissory estoppel" in contracts, "res ipsa loquitur" in torts, and the claims, counterclaims and crossclaims of civil procedure, the students who gathered for the annual event delighted in Bellamy's refreshing brand of straight talk.

"Slavery is working for someone else without making a measurable contribution to our own communities," Bellamy told members of the Black, Latin American and Asian American law student associations at the dinner, held April 18 in Fanny's restaurant. "There is nothing noble about that."

As corporate counsel for the Celera Genomics – the group credited with sequencing the human genome – Bellamy manages the corporation's law department. A captain in the U.S. Army Re-

serves, he is also co-founder of Charting Your Own Course, a national conference directed at the career goals of attorneys of color. Each year, conference leaders urge hundreds of participants to foster their own development and support each other – some of the very points Bellamy stressed during his talk for UB law students.

"The go-it-alone strategy does not work," he told his audience. "Never be too busy for each other. You will continue to be one another's greatest support group for the balance of your career."

Titling his speech "Eight Pearls of Wisdom," Bellamy noted that it represented his best thoughts of the moment. Among his main points were the following:

- Pedigree is not everything. "It is the sum total of our academic credentials, social background and presentation," Bellamy said. "And this access that we call pedigree goes into steep decline shortly after graduation. It may get you in the door, but it is not going to get you home."

- A successful career doesn't stem solely from hard work. "Meritocracy is a fallacy. Hard work is great, but charting your course strategically is better."

- In the legal profession, race still matters. "You are going to spend the rest of your careers selling intellect. That is an interesting thing to sell, particularly when you look different from those who are procuring that intellect at a price. It is a surmountable challenge, but it is going to require that you know the difference between selling and selling out."

- Lawyers of color risk being "ghettoized." "There will be those who would direct you into areas of the law that are less fertile than others — area of the law with more past than future. Steer clear of that. Go into areas of the law where there is more future than past."

- Lawyers need stakeholders, not mentors. "In the traditional mentor model, there is a big disparity in need and ability. It is an empathy-based relationship, which is certainly important. But you need more than that. You need stakeholders, people who view your success and their success as indivisible. That person can be your peer, your grandmama – it could be anybody. But it is somebody who can look you in the eye and say, 'I'm successful and thus you will be successful' – and mean it, and act on it."



Left to right, Samuel P. Davis '02, Katrina E. Rawlins '02, Marie A. Martial '02, and Daria L. Pratcher '02.

• Time is an attorney's most precious asset. "Interesting deal you cut at the law firm: In exchange for your salary, they own your time. Many of us, myself included, believed, 'I am on the firm's clock.' Not true. The firm is on your clock – your time. You won't get it back. Use it smartly.

"Successful attorneys invest meaningful time in their own development," Bellamy concluded. "Why? Because they understand, as you will understand, that no one will invest more in you than you are willing to invest in yourself. That goes for time, money and any other resource that one can assign to one's growth."

Throughout the evening, others who took the podium referred to Bellamy's inspirational speech. That included Hon. Michael A. Battle, U.S. attorney for the Western District of New York.

Upon accepting the Alumni Award, Battle said that Bellamy's talk struck a personal chord with him, reminding him of the people who have encouraged him throughout his career. "If you see a door open for opportunity," he told students, "don't just walk through it – run through it."

Receiving the Jacob D. Hyman Award, UB Law School Professor Amy Deen Westbrook sounded a note of appreciation to the students for their scholarship and perseverance. "I wish there were more ways for me and others to publicly honor each of you, especially those of you who are graduating, in order to recognize that you are not only good law students, but also that you are making and will continue to make a vital contribution to the legal profession through your hard work and example."

One of the two Trailblazer Awards went to Lillie A. Wiley-Upshaw, associate dean of admissions and financial aid. In her former position as director of recruitment, Wiley-Upshaw helped increase the minority representation at the Law School to nearly 20 percent. That fact was not lost on many of the dinner guests, who clapped energetically as Wiley-Upshaw accepted the award, and fought back tears as she spoke.

"I know many of you started with great trepidation – some of you with

many fears," Wiley-Upshaw said. "But you should look back on your experience and be very proud of what you have done. I want to thank you all for including me in your life."

Oliver C. Young, principal court attorney for the New York State Supreme Court, also received a Trailblazer Award. The 1980 UB Law School alumnus reminded the graduates in the group to inspire those students who follow them.

"Look back on those you're leaving behind," he said. "Assist them in their journey."

Young's message was perfectly contained in the candle lighting ceremony, a beloved end-of-the-evening ritual in which graduates light the candle of the more junior students, symbolically passing on their wisdom and experience to their peers.

Appropriately, the poem read during the ceremony was Will Allen Dromgoole's "The Bridge Builder."