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Students of Color traditional candle-lighting ceremony.

'THE REWARDS ARE PRICELESS'

Latin American students urged by Carlos Rodriguez '76 to help people through the legal process

By Nicole Peradotto

Following tradition, the members of one of the minority law student associations selected the evening's keynote speaker for the 2004 Students of Color Recognition Dinner, held April 2 at the Buffalo Marriott Hotel. This year the Latin American Law Students Association chose New York State Assistant Attorney General Carlos Rodriguez '76.

While encouraging the students to keep sight of their goals, Rodriguez admitted that, when he was in their place, he nearly abandoned his. After his first year of UB Law, he told them, he was despondent because he had come so close to flunking out. Then he landed a summer work-study job at the district attorney's office at home in the Bronx.

"It was the best thing that ever happened to me," he said. "It refreshed my memory as to why I went to law school in the first place – because I wanted to help people through the legal process. I came back to Buffalo with a passion to be a lawyer."

Rededicating himself to his studies, Rodriguez took summer school and, during his final semester, loaded up on extra credit hours. After graduation he started working for the Legal Aid Society

of Rochester, one of only two Latino attorneys practicing in the city.

"After I was admitted to the bar, during one of my first cases, I was in criminal court representing someone, and I was in the attorneys' line. The judge thought I was the defendant. I had to politely tell the judge, 'No, your honor, I'm defense counsel.' And I said that proudly."

For the past 23 years Rodriguez has been a state and federal court trial litigator with the attorney general's office. For the past eight years he has worked in the public advocacy and consumer frauds bureau, protecting consumers by seeking injunctive relief against individuals who engage in deceptive and illegal conduct of business.

He encouraged members of the audience to consider government service. "The money's not great, but the rewards are priceless," he said, referring to several cases close to his heart. While working in the public defender's office, for example,

Rodriguez represented two Latino children who had been taken away from their mother and placed with non-Latino foster parents who didn't speak Spanish.

"During the trial, the social worker testified, 'These kids aren't Latino anymore. They're not Puerto Rican anymore,'" Rodriguez remembered. "I was beside myself. Needless to say, not only did the judge return the kids to the mother, who had reformed herself, but the judge ordered the county to start looking for Latino and minority foster and adoptive homes."

In addition to Rodriguez, other honorees at the dinner included the four UB Law alumni who were named by *Black Enterprise* magazine as among the top black lawyers in America: Michael Banks '89, Michael Battle '81, Vincent Dunn '89 and Brent Wilson '76 (see article on Page 4); Lenora Foote '97, assistant corporation counsel for Buffalo, who received the Trailblazer Award; and Professor Janet Lindgren, recipient of the Jacob D. Hyman Award.

For her part, Lindgren urged all the students in attendance to "take it, make it and carry it."

"In terms of taking it, I mean figuring out what is there to grab, to do," said Lindgren, "what is going to work for you.

"Then make it your own by mixing it with who you are," she added. "We are sometimes told in law school to forget everything you knew before. Hopefully you didn't. You remember what you learned and everything you know from being a parent, a child, a family member, someone who has worked – someone who has lived.

"And then carry it: Carry what you have learned from one class to another class, from one setting to another setting."

What about bringing it back?

By serving as the voice of experience to the next generation of lawyers, all the awardees did just that. However, when Brent Wilson stood at the podium to accept

the distinguished alumni award, he decided to literally give something back.

At the end of his speech, he held aloft a weathered hardcover volume. "In closing, I want to let the dean know that there is an 'Am Jur Second 16' that has been missing for 36 years," Wilson said with a laugh. "Here it is."



New York State Assistant Attorney General Carlos Rodriguez '76.