Hitting Her Stride in the Courtroom

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Hitting her stride in the courtroom

The first time Jamella James '15 argued a case as part of SUNY Buffalo Law School’s trial team, her stomach was in knots.

The second time, in San Antonio, Texas, a little better.

The third time she nailed it, winning honors as Best Oral Advocate in the John L. Costello Criminal Law Advocacy Competition at Virginia’s George Mason University School of Law.

That’s how being on trial team – a major part of the Law School’s Advocacy Institute constellation of programs – develops real-world lawyering skills through hands-on experience.

James, a lively conversationalist, would seem a natural to stand before a jury and argue her client’s case. But in tryouts for the Law School’s team in their Buffalo-Niagara Mock Trial Competition, “I was a mess,” she says. “It’s such an intense, nerve-racking thing, and I didn’t know what I was doing.” But she brought her competitive spirit and her creativity to the case, and started to hit her stride. The case involved a masked man running from the crime scene, so James bought a black ski mask at Walmart, draped it over a water bottle and made it a dramatic part of her opening argument for the defense.

It’s the kind of tactic that’s hard to learn in a classroom, and James says the overall experience has made her more self-assured as she prepares to enter the profession and looks for her first legal job, likely as a public prosecutor. “I can sell ice cubes to an Eskimo now,” she says. “The coaches helped develop and bring out my trial personality to help me grow and become confident in myself.”

James, who grew up in foster homes in Rochester, had her first experiences with the legal system as a child when caring family court judges took an interest in her welfare. After graduating from the University of Rochester she worked as a foster care caseworker, then with mentally ill adults, before coming to law school to pursue her dream of becoming a family court judge.

Her coaches on SUNY Buffalo Law’s trial teams – she cites especially Christopher J. O’Brien, Matt Murray and Kathleen M. Reilly ’91 – hold the competitors to rigorous standards. “As trial attorneys, they have very high expectations, so I challenged myself to meet each one of them,” James says. “Do not come unprepared to trial practice. You will not like it. You will get ragged on, because that’s what’s going to happen in real life.”

But in the midst of a hard-fought competition, precise attention pays off. In the Virginia competition, with teammates Aaron VanNostrand ’16 and Kery Ferrell ’16, James says they were up until the wee hours, writing notes for the trial. The case involved a woman who suffered domestic violence for years, then burned down her house, killing her abusive ex-husband. In a tearful closing argument, James showed the jury a half-dozen pictures of the abused woman, scarred and bleeding. “I never felt closer to Zen than in that final round,” James says. “We just leveled people. They didn’t see us coming.”

“I’ve got a lot of pride,” James says of the skills she has learned. She also has pushed her fellow students of color to take part in trial team. “I love this program,” she says. “I can try a case from beginning to end, and I love it. It drives me. It was the most fun that I’ve had, and the most I’ve learned in any class.”

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