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At Students of Color Dinner, aspirations and inspiration

Looking back in celebration and forward in anticipation, SUNY Buffalo Law School’s students of color gathered at their annual dinner to renew their commitment to “lift as we climb.”

The April 23 dinner – the 26th annual – was held at the Buffalo Niagara Marriott. A joint venture of the Black Law Students Association, the Latin American Law Students Association and the Asian Pacific American Law Students Association, the event celebrated the achievements of 21 graduating students.

The program began with keynote speaker Michael Battle ’81, a former U.S. Attorney for the Western District of New York who now practices commercial and civil litigation with the New York City firm Schlam Stone & Dolan.

Remembering his own uncertainty about his career prospects as a newly graduated attorney, he told of two law students who found success.

The first was a young woman whom he had hired for a summer position as a prosecutor. Upon graduation she was desperate to work in a big city, but began her career with the district attorney’s office in a small town in Michigan. Two years later, Battle said, she called him with the news that her dream had arrived: She was working in the district attorney’s office in Las Vegas.

The second story was similar: Another young career-seeker asked Battle’s advice on becoming a judicial law clerk at the federal level. “Cast a wide net,” he told her – advice that helped her land a clerkship in Minneapolis.

“You’re going to have the skills to be successful, to find a job, to have a career,” he told the students. “No matter what, don’t be bound by geography, because you never know how it’s going to turn out. The opportunity has not changed. All you have to do is make it happen. And there are a lot of people who are willing to help you make it happen.”

Hon. Hugh Scott ’74 and Susan Soong ’94 were honored as Distinguished Alummi Award recipients.

Scott, a magistrate judge of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of New York, is the first African-American to sit on the federal bench in the Western District. In accepting the award, he encouraged his listeners to give back. “The job is No. 1,” Scott said. “But one of the best ways to get a job is to get out in the community and let them know who you are and what you’re about. Everyone here should find some way to engage in the community, to make the community they’re practicing in a better place. Whether it’s mentoring a law student or reading in an elementary school, we can encourage people to do better.”

For her part, Soong – chief deputy clerk with the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, in San Francisco – recalled going to a conference at the University of Chicago when she was a first-year law student. Seeing an Asian-American woman there “speaking with authority about the law” to a full auditorium, Soong said, made a huge impact on her. “All of you in this room can do that for other people,” she said. “Every one of you can make a difference, be a role model and give back to your community.”

Other awardees included Jason Almonte ’07, a manager in the advisory services practice of the audit, tax and advisory firm KPMG, who received the Trailblazer Award, and Professor Rick Su, who was named the Jacob D. Hyman Professor of the Year.

Almonte encouraged the new lawyers to represent themselves well as professionals, but also to represent the Law School well. “I always mention what an amazing education I got here,” he said. “You are entering one of the most honorable professions in our society. Be proud of that, honor it and always cherish it, and you’ll be fine.”

Su was brief in his remarks, saying with a smile to the students, “The only reason I do what I do and earn what I earn is because of you.”

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