Celebrating the Colors of Success

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One of the longest-running traditions of the School of Law, the Students of Color Dinner, brought together nearly 200 students, faculty and supporters to celebrate achievements and hear words of challenge.

The 28th annual gathering, held April 20 at the Buffalo Niagara Marriott, is a joint venture of organizations representing UB’s African-American, Latino, Asian-American and Native American law students. Reflecting that diversity, the organizers recognized several School of Law alumni who have had notable success.

Chief among them was the evening’s keynote speaker, The Arthur A. Duncan II ’12, who has chronicled his path from convicted felon to practicing lawyer in a memoir, Felon-Attorney.

Duncan’s address told his story – one of a dangerous childhood, and substantial challenges that he had to overcome, including commuting from Buffalo to Cleveland for his first year of law school, failing the bar exam because he was a lousy typist, and proving himself before the Bar Association’s Character and Fitness Committee.

He didn’t just face adversity, Duncan said – “I overcame adversity and I kicked adversity’s ass.”

Just recently, he said, he was admitted to federal practice by U.S. District Court Judge William Skrenty – the same judge who sentenced him to prison on a drug conviction. (Judge Skrenty was in the audience.) His sponsoring attorney for that event: the criminal lawyer who had represented him.

Acknowledging those who helped him along the way, Duncan challenged the audience to do the same. “If you find someone worthy of a second chance,” he said, “after you have vetted them properly, you have to write that letter of recommendation, you have to make that phone call.”

The organizers conferred Distinguished Alumni Awards on Crystal Rodriguez ’06, LL.M. ’07, chief diversity officer of the City of Buffalo, and Jodyann Galvin ’98, a partner with the Buffalo firm Hodgson Russ LLP. And their Trailblazer Award went to Jason Lee ’07, founder and CEO of Celant, a start-up company that is working on software to automate some routine legal tasks.

Lee, who practiced for eight years at a Wall Street law firm, said the idea for his company came when he received a late-night assignment that had to be done by morning. “I asked myself, why can’t this be automated?” he said. “Maybe I could be the guy who automates the process so that the people who come after me don’t have to go through this type of work at 1 in the morning. We’re trying to make the practice of law a little bit less stressful, a little bit more enjoyable.”

Finally, Professor Athena Mutua accepted the Jacob D. Hyman Professor Award with an acknowledgment of the difficult political climate nationally.

“This has been a really tough year for students of color and for people of color in general,” she said. “For some of us, this is the first time we’re experiencing this.

“But I have seen students stand up for themselves, write letters advocating for fair treatment for themselves and for others. I have seen them protest and resist this ugliness, I have seen them stand, and their resistance has been inspiring.”

The chair of the Students of Color Dinner was Jordan Sieracki ’18.

For more photos and videos from our events visit: www.law.buffalo.edu/forum/extra