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Rising Stars: Students of Color Dinner Looks to A Bright Future

UB Law Forum

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Law School Report

STUDENTS OF COLOR



Left to right: Jodi-Kay E. Williams '09, Aparnaa J. Bhatt '09 and Dino P. Peragallo '09.

Rising stars

Students of Color Dinner looks to a bright future

In keeping with the theme “Lifting as We Climb,” the Law School’s annual Students of Color Dinner brought together graduating students, continuing students, faculty and a wide variety of friends to celebrate achievement and call for a commitment to serve others as only lawyers can.

The April 12 dinner, held at the Buffalo Niagara Marriott, is a joint venture of the Asian American Law Students Association, the Black Law Students Association and the Latin American Law Students Associa-

tion. It mixed solemnity – the annual candle-lighting ceremony in which seniors symbolically pass the torch of achievement to the next generation – with laughter, as distinguished alumni, faculty and others were honored for their achievements.

With a slide show of smiling Law School faces running continuously in the background, those honored shared words of thanks and advice with those who will soon be their colleagues in the legal profession.

“Looking out at this room, I see the future of this country as every room should

look like,” said Clotilde Bode-Perez Dedecker, president of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, the evening’s keynote speaker. Dedecker, who immigrated to the United States from her childhood home in Cuba, recounted some of her life experiences – “in hopes,” she said, “that these might give insight and inspiration of your rights and responsibilities to be a player in the great experiment of our American democracy.”

She remembered the rationing of food in Cuba, and the long lines at government



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– Clotilde Bode-Perez Dedecker, president of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo

stores. The black market flourished, despite the threat of prison. In 1964, Dedecker said, her parents asked the Cuban government for permission to leave, then had to endure three years of close scrutiny – including wiretapped phones – before they were allowed to leave the country. They had to relinquish all their possessions, allowed to take only 30 pounds of clothing apiece.

They arrived in Miami with \$10 and began anew. When the family moved to Buffalo so Dedecker’s father could study at UB, “the community provided for us for two years,” she said. “I know the power of community resources, because I have experienced them as a beneficiary.”

Dedecker has wide experience in public service and serves on several boards, and she challenged her listeners to tackle such problems as high poverty rates among African-American and Latino children in Buffalo. “I am very fortunate to tell you that I love my work and know that it matters,” she said. “Speaking to the 2007 graduates, I wish the same for you. I believe that only in giving to others do we discover our true selves. Only then can the promise of America be the practice of America on a day-to-day basis.”

Three graduates of UB Law School received Distinguished Alumni Awards at the dinner. They are:
Hon. Rose H. Sconiers ’73, justice of the New York State Supreme Court for the 8th District. Justice Sconiers was delayed in New York City by canceled plane flights. Cecelia Henderson accepted the award on her behalf.

Bradley Gayton ’91, assistant tax officer and director of tax operations for Ford Motor Co. Gayton said he had expressed reservations about the award to his mother, who responded: “This is not about you. People of color need to celebrate successes not for the individual’s sake, but so people can point to them and say, ‘If he can do it, so can I.’”

Nicole Lee ’02, executive director of



TransAfrica Forum, the leading advocacy organization for African and the African diaspora in the United States. Said Lee: “I wish someone had said to me and my class more, do what is in your heart, because that is what you are going to be good at. That is what you are going to be successful at.”

The Trailblazer Award was presented to Rochester lawyer *Michael R. Wolford* ’68, managing partner of Wolford & Leclair. As president of the Monroe County Bar Association, Wolford initiated a program to develop lawyers of color, now entering its third year with 13 summer clerkships. “This profession of ours is only going to succeed if we become more diverse, right up through managing partners and the judiciary,” he said.

Professor Dianne Avery ’82 was honored

with the Jacob D. Hyman Professor of the Year Award, and used the occasion to speak of the accomplishments of Hyman, who died April 8. Avery cited Hyman’s tolerance and compassion as a teacher, and his “absolute passion for and commitment to social justice,” including a law review article four years before *Brown v. Board of Education* that argued for the dismantling



Above, SUNY Distinguished Professor Makau Mutua and Nicole C. Lee ’02

At left: left to right, Carolina Felix ’08 and Evelyn Abiola ’08

of segregation in American education.

Finally, the Lift as We Climb Scholarship was awarded to Maryland native *Patrice Harris*, a senior at UB majoring in biomedical sciences and pre-law studies.

The 14-person Students of Color Dinner Committee was chaired by Carolina Felix ’07, with representatives from each Law School class.