12-1-2017

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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum/vol32/iss1/8

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EXTENDING A HAND, OPENING DOORS

A proud record of growing opportunities for all

Like climbing a steep cliff, sometimes the hardest part of the transition from law school to practice is getting that first foothold. It can be especially difficult when a student or new graduate will be the first lawyer in the family.

For more than a decade, Michael Wolford ’68 has helped to serve as that point of entry – with special attention to extending a hand to UB School of Law students.

Wolford, a former Assistant U.S. Attorney, practiced for 21 years with the Rochester, N.Y., firm Nixon, Hargrave, Devans & Doyle, before founding his own litigation firm – now known as The Wolford Law Firm LLP – in 1993. It was during his year as president of the Monroe County Bar Association in 2004–05 that he learned about other bar associations’ efforts to help grow the proportion of underrepresented minority lawyers in the profession. He gathered the managing partners of Rochester’s biggest firms for lunch, and by dessert they had agreed to start a diversity clerkship program.

Eight firms, including Wolford’s, hired summer associates that year through the program, all UB School of Law students. The program has been most successful ever since, now with support from the Monroe County Bar Foundation, the Greater Rochester Association of Women Attorneys and the Rochester Black Bar Association.

Wolford says the goal is to make the Rochester bar more diverse, but a side benefit is a slew of opportunities for students at New York State’s top public law school, just an hour or so down the Thruway. In total, 140 law students have participated in the program since the summer of 2005, including 78 from UB.

“Mike always made sure to introduce me to people; he was always talking me up and giving me confidence. He doesn’t do things because it looks good. He just does it because he cares.”

— Ninteretse Jean Pierre ’16 with Michael Wolford ’68
“I look at it as a win-win proposition,” says Wolford, who remains active in the program. “Nearly all the students we’ve had have been top-notch. We look at their application, their writing sample and their grades. They come in February or early March, and they are interviewed before they are extended any offers. It’s a little like the NFL draft—we try to get the best students. The folks that we’ve had have been terrific people and fine students, and they’ve done very well and contributed to our practice.”

Interns hired through the program earn a salary for legal tasks including research and writing. They can sit in on trials and hearings, and they’re exposed to different practice areas. “We obviously try to convince them that Rochester is a great place to practice,” Wolford says, “and we try to assimilate them into the legal community here.”

Besides Wolford, three attorneys at The Wolford Law Firm LLP are UB School of Law graduates. Laura A. Myers ‘05, who practices mostly in commercial litigation, is one of them.

“Mike is a genuinely good and caring person,” she says, “and he really does believe it’s part of his mission to give back and make the world a better place. He’s also a person who can identify a problem and act on it. That’s really inspiring to the people around him. He has more motivation and drive than most of us. It’s impressive.”

Myers also says the office’s most recent interns—Annabelle Gao ’18 and Ninteretse Jean Pierre ’16—have been outstanding.

“It’s probably one of the best programs in Rochester,” says Jean Pierre, now an associate attorney at the Rochester firm Nixon Peabody. “It was hands-on—I helped with research, legal writing, drafting memos, reviewing and summarizing documents, working on complaints and answers. It was a great experience.”

About Wolford he says, “Mike always made sure to introduce me to people; he was always talking me up and giving me confidence. He doesn’t do things because it looks good. He just does it because he cares.”

Another former intern in the program, Tamara S. Frazier ’12, now serves as associate counsel for the New York State Senate Democratic Conference.

“I really liked the law firm,” Frazier says. “It was small, no more than 10 attorneys, and they gave you lots of opportunities to ask questions. It was interesting, as an African-American female, to hear a complainant talk about her experience being discriminated against on the basis of race.

“Mike had a very open-door policy, and he didn’t hesitate to introduce me to different people. Ultimately, they want to make sure we succeed in a profession where there are not a lot of professionals of color, especially women. Mike is such a genuine person, and a great mentor.”

How YOU Can Help

Interested in supporting the law school’s diversity efforts?

Help support the Discover Law Program and encourage promising undergraduate students to consider a career in law. To find out more about the program, see Page 17 or contact:

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