

# SBM Young Lawyers Section Starts Program to Improve Diversity in the Legal Profession

By Donald S. Rencher

**"T**he lack of diversity in race, gender, and background poses a huge danger to the judiciary,"<sup>1</sup> United States Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor said in a speech to the American University Washington College of Law.

Many in the legal profession have echoed this sentiment.

A 2013 article published in *The New York Times* reported that "[t]he share of the nation's lawyers who are minorities and women, which had been growing slowly but steadily for years, fell in 2010 for the first time since NALP, the National Association for Law Placement, began keeping statistics in 1993. The deep recession not only disproportionately hurt African-Americans in many fields, but it also led businesses to make diversity programs less of a priority."<sup>2</sup>

Unlike those businesses, the State Bar of Michigan Young Lawyers Section recognizes the importance of diversity in our profession and continues to prioritize programs that focus on issues of diversity and inspire future generations of diverse individuals to consider law as a viable career path.

In its report entitled *Diversity in the Legal Profession: The Next Steps Report and Recommendations*, the American Bar Association Presidential Initiative Commission on Diversity encouraged bar associations to support, fund, and expand the development of pipeline programs that help diverse youth work toward joining the legal profession.<sup>3</sup> Over the years, the Young Lawyers Section has done that by supporting numerous pipeline efforts such as the Just The Beginning Foundation Summer Legal Institute—Detroit and the ABA's Council on Legal Education Opportunity College Pre-law Summer Institute. The section wholeheartedly believes that the best hope for



Photos courtesy of Hope Shovein

The SBM Young Lawyers Section held its newly developed pipeline program, "Cracking the Legal Field Pipeline Mock Trial Competition," at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law on March 1.

achieving a more diverse profession is making a concerted effort to reach young people at every stage of their development.

As chair of the Young Lawyers Section Diversity Committee, I believe that by establishing a pipeline through community outreach and mentoring we can help support and foster the aspirations of diverse students to become lawyers.

On March 1, the Young Lawyers Section held its newly developed pipeline program, "Cracking the Legal Field Pipeline Mock Trial Competition," at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law. Approximately 80 students from the Detroit metropolitan area ranging in age from 6 to 18 participated in

the day-long program. Students from SKIP, Inc.; Detroit Cristo Rey High School; and Hope of Detroit Academy tried a criminal case involving an alleged homicide by a former boxer.

During the program, students received firsthand knowledge of criminal courtroom procedures from volunteers. Elementary students served as bailiffs in the respective courtrooms and the other student participants were split by age group into teams of four. Half of the students represented the prosecution and the other half represented the defense. Each team prepared an opening statement, direct examination, cross-examination, and closing statement. Local

The inaugural program was such a tremendous success that the Young Lawyers Section has committed to expanding it next year.



Members of the Young Lawyers Section and speakers from the event's panel discussion. Bottom row, left to right: YLS members Molly Bourbeau, Felicia Johnson, Stephanie Farkas, Tanya Cripps, and Hope Shovein. Second row: Donald Rencher, YLS; Hon. Cylenchia LaToye Miller; and Hon. Katherine Hansen. Third row: Hon. Qiana Denise Lillard and Hon. Margaret M. Van Houten. Fourth row: Hon. Robert J. Colombo Jr.; Jerome Crawford, YLS; and Eyad Fakhoury, student volunteer, UDM Law.

judges presided over the competition rounds while attorney and law school volunteers served as witnesses for the teams and helped draft arguments and questions.

Although the competition marked many of the students' first ventures into oral advocacy, they did a wonderful job in the preliminary rounds trying to prove their cases. A panel discussion on the legal profession followed. Participants included Judges Robert J. Colombo (3rd Circuit Court), Katherine L. Hansen (36th District Court), Qiana Denise Lillard (3rd Circuit Court), Cylenchia LaToye Miller (36th District Court), and Margaret Van Houten (3rd Circuit Court). Also participating were Jerome Crawford, an associate at Dickinson Wright PLLC; and Eyad Fakhoury, a student at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law. I served as moderator and asked the panel various questions submitted by students.

Following the discussion, the top four teams faced off before the judicial panel, with Judge Colombo presiding as chief judge. After a great final round, the top two teams were presented awards. Judge Lillard and Mr. Crawford then demonstrated how actual attorneys might argue the mock trial. The students looked on in awe as the two

eloquently presented their cases for the prosecution and defense, respectively. Mr. Fakhoury also put his trial advocacy skills to use as co-counsel for the defense.

The inaugural program was such a tremendous success that the Young Lawyers Section has committed to expanding it next year, and many of the participating judges have expressed an interest in returning.

I was extremely excited to enter this pipeline program into the ABA Young Lawyers Division's Next Steps Diversity Challenge, which is a grant initiative designed to encourage young lawyers and law school groups to create and further enhance programs promoting diversity and inclusion in the legal profession. We specifically chose to host a mock trial competition and panel discussion to expose diverse K-12 students to oral advocacy and cultivate a strong interest in the law. We are extremely grateful to the volunteers, especially the judges; Denise Hickey, assistant dean of alumni relations at UDM Law; and the UDM Law Arab Chaldean Law Student Association. If you are interested in taking part in this event next year, please contact me at (313) 456-2312 or RencherD@michigan.gov. ■



*Donald S. Rencher is a staff attorney for the Michigan State Housing Development Authority, Office of Legal Affairs. He primarily focuses on real estate transaction law (specifically multi-family, serving as lead counsel to the MSHDA Single Family Division), administrative law, and fair housing. He currently is the diversity chair of the SBM Young Lawyers Section Executive Council.*

## ENDNOTES

1. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Address at the American University College of Law (November 19, 2013).
2. Schwartz, *Racial diversity efforts ebb for elite careers, analysis finds*, The New York Times, May 27, 2013.
3. See ABA Presidential Initiative Commission on Diversity, *Diversity in the Legal Profession: The Next Steps Report and Recommendations* (April 2010), available at <[http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/diversity/next\\_steps\\_2011.authcheckdam.pdf](http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/diversity/next_steps_2011.authcheckdam.pdf)> (accessed April 15, 2014).

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