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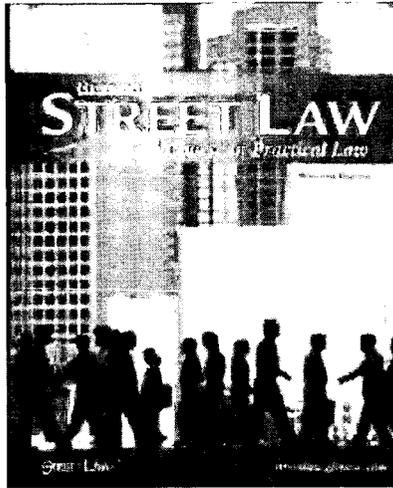
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STREET LAW USES LEGAL EDUCATION TO EMPOWER UNDERPRIVILEGED YOUTH

by ADAM MILLER

Youth violence continues to run rampant on the streets of Chicago. Since 2000, Chicago has seen well over 25,000 juvenile arrests per year; more than 90 percent of the arrestees were minorities.¹ According to Mary Bird, the Director of Public Service Programs and Coordinator of the Street Law Program at Loyola University Chicago School of Law, “many [underprivileged youth] demonstrate amazing resiliency, sometimes overcoming great obstacles. Others are dispirited by their surrounding circumstances and personal challenges. Nevertheless, these are tomorrow’s leaders.”²



The legal profession has historically recognized the importance of providing services to those in need.³ Street Law is one example of a grassroots approach to empowering individuals, particularly young individuals. Street Law uses the legal profession to stimulate youth education by establishing programs that provide unique opportunities for law students and attorneys to gain real-life experience by helping to educate underserved communities.⁴

WHERE STREET LAW BEGAN

The concept of Street Law began in 1972 when law students at Georgetown University came up with the idea to move the focus on law from just the courtrooms to the underprivileged public high schools of Washington, D.C.⁵ One of the original founders, Edward O'Brien, was a law student at Georgetown who had taken a break from law school to teach social studies at a West Baltimore high school.⁶ O'Brien, along with several other law students, wanted to bring practical law to local high school students.⁷

"To design the pilot program we looked around to see what curricula existed in the United States," O'Brien said.⁸ "We found pilots that had been conducted at Boston University and St. Louis University. We designed some lessons, went out and interviewed a number of lawyers doing legal services for the poor, and prepared a list of what they said were [the most important issues] impacting people in D.C."⁹

STREET LAW TODAY

Today, O'Brien heads Street Law, Inc., a non-profit organization that has provided Street Law education to hundreds of law students in more than 70 law schools across the United States and more than 25 countries throughout the world.¹⁰

Through its educational partnerships with an assortment of government agencies, nonprofit organizations, judges, lawyers, educators and law students, Street Law's programs have reached American youth in public and private schools, community centers, juvenile justice facilities, hospitals, teen-parent programs, police agencies and more.¹¹ Some of its partners include the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, Association for Corporate Counsel, Law School Admission Council, National Institute for Dispute Resolution and the Supreme Court Historical Society.¹²

THE GOAL

Street Law programs aim to initiate three core concepts. The first is to teach young people practical information about the law, democracy and human rights. The second core concept is to develop the skills young people need in order to use this practical information in their community and in their lives. Lastly, the program seeks to deepen young people's commitment to their communities through meaningful partnerships with caring adults and involvement in community activities.¹³

Through the use of educational lessons and activities, Street Law programs focus on eliminating risks for violence, delinquency and conflict while helping youth develop basic skills.¹⁴ Sessions teach about any aspect of law that may be relevant in the lives of the students such as housing, employment, child custody, abuse and neglect, consumer law, criminal law, the juvenile justice system, police procedures, domestic violence, rape and gun laws.¹⁵ Street Law programs instituted in high schools are often assisted by a Street Law textbook, which guides the students in learning about their rights and responsibilities as citizens and consumers; for example, what they should and should not do when stopped by the police.¹⁶

According to Lee Arbetman, Director of Domestic Programs at Street Law, Inc. and co-author of the Street Law textbook, Street Law programs provide an important public service.¹⁷

“Street Law provides the community an opportunity to understand the law and to learn how to navigate through our law-saturated society,” said Arbetman.¹⁸ “The public sees lawyers in a positive role, creating more trust toward the legal community and respect of the law.”¹⁹

The effect of Street Law programs and law related youth education has not gone unnoticed. Studies have shown that properly implemented Street Law programs can improve classroom participation, attendance and enthusiasm for school.²⁰

Formal evaluations as well as anecdotal reports from teachers and administrators show that Street Law programs increase understanding and belief in laws, increase bonding to school and system officials, and decrease incidents of rule-breaking.²¹

As Patrick Campbell, a former high school student and now a successful practicing attorney and board member of Street Law, Inc. explained:

“There was a time when I would not have dared to dream of becoming a lawyer. Back then, hope of survival took precedence over thoughts of success. As I was growing up impoverished in a violence-plagued ghetto in the heart of Kingston, Jamaica, my home consisted of a single room, which I shared with my mother, stepfather, sister, and two brothers. It was common, and in some instances inevitable, for young boys in the neighborhood to grow up to become gunmen [for the violent and hostile stronghold surrounding the brutal 1980 election]. In those days, I never thought that coming to the United States and taking a course called Street Law would give me the tools and the motivation to become a lawyer.”²²

STREET LAW GAINS MOMENTUM

Street Law has not limited itself to bringing law related education to public high schools, but has grown to implement and develop a number of different public interest initiatives.

The program has “developed very interesting conflict resolution and advocacy programs for teens,” as well as “niche Street Law programs for young parents and for youth aging out of the foster care system,” said Arbetman.²³

Due to low minority representation among lawyers and in the law applicant pool, Street Law partnered with the Law School Admission Council and 10 law schools late last year to launch an initiative to help diversify the legal profession.²⁴ The main focus of the project has been to develop a career choice component in high schools designed to encourage students of color to continue their education and pursue legal careers.²⁵ The diversity initiative is currently in its preliminary stages.²⁶

To supplement this new diversity program and the existing Street Law programs, Street Law, Inc. also developed the Corporate Legal Diversity Pipeline Program, a program that partners corporate legal departments with diverse high school law classes to teach students about civil law and encourage them to pursue legal careers.²⁷ As of early 2007, the Corporate Diversity Pipeline Program has already partnered with more than 21 major corporations, including McDonald’s Corporation, The Coca-Cola Company, General Motors Corporation and General Electric.²⁸

THE FUTURE OF STREET LAW

While Street Law has achieved success and has expanded to reach more individuals, programs such as Street Law still face significant hurdles.

“Funding is always a challenge,” said Arbetman.²⁹

Having been funded in part by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) since 1978, Arbetman was surprised to learn this year that the OJJDP did not have the resources to further support Street Law.³⁰

While the loss of government funding from the OJJDP is hurtful to Street Law, strong contributions from private funding sources have kept Street Law’s momentum going.³¹ There are now Street Law programs implemented across the globe. Australia is the only remaining continent without any Street Law program, but Arbetman has already had meetings with Australian representatives this past fall.³²

For many of the teens, Street Law programs serve as an eye-opener and a needed boost in self-esteem, as some are even driven to pursue a legal career of their own.³³ Yet the educational advantages of Street Law programs are not only garnered by the high school students in the classrooms.

Law students teaching in the Street Law Programs have shown an increase in legal knowledge and lawyering skills, development of new perspectives, and an enrichment of their law school experience.³⁴

“I believe that law students have both the responsibility and the good fortune to interact with [students]”, said Mary Bird. “I am glad that Street Law provides that experience.”³⁵

NOTES

1 Chicago Police Department, Research and Development Division, *Juvenile Justice Report, Juvenile Arrest Trends* (June 2006), http://egov.cityofchicago.org/webportal/COCWebPortal/COC_EDITORIAL/JuvJustV3I1.pdf

2 Interview with Mary Bird, Director of Public Service Programs, Loyola University Chicago School of Law, in Chicago, Ill. (Oct. 28, 2007).

3 Alexandra Ashbrook, *Street Law: Putting Your Legal Education to Work*, www.streetlaw.org/pdfs/AAreflections.doc.

4 *Id.*

5 Matthew M. Kavanagh and Bebs Chorak, *Teaching Law as a Life Skill, How Street Law Helps Youth Make the Transition to Adult Citizenship*, J. JUV. JUST. & DETENTION SERVICES, 71, 72 (Volume 18, Number 1, Spring 2003).

6 Mary Wisniewski, *Street Law shatters teens myths about the legal system*, CHICAGO LAWYER, March 1999, available at <http://www.streetlaw.org/content.asp?ContentId=220>.

7 Alexandra Ashbrook, *supra* note 3.

8 *Id.*

9 *Id.*

10 *Id.*

11 Matthew M. Kavanagh and Bebs Chorak, *supra* note 5 at 72.

12 *See Generally*, www.streetlaw.org.

13 Matthew M. Kavanagh and Bebs Chorak, *supra* note 5 at 72.

14 *Id.* at 72.

15 *Id.* at 73.

16 Barry E. Katz, *Practical Law 101*, STUDENT LAWYER, October 2001 (Vol. 30, No. 2), available at <http://streetlaw.org/pdfs/practicallawarticle.pdf>.

17 Alexandra Ashbrook, *supra* note 3.

18 *Id.* at 73.

19 *Id.*

20 Matthew M. Kavanagh and Bebs Chorak, *supra* note 5 at 72.

21 *Id.* at 73.

- 22 Alexandra Ashbrook, *supra* note 3.
- 23 Telephone Interview with Lee Arbetman, Director of United States Programs, Street Law, Inc., in Chicago, Ill. (Oct. 8, 2007).
- 24 Allison Hawkins, *Diversity Initiative Launched in Law Schools*, STREET LAW INK, Volume I, Number 3, September 2006, <http://www.streetlaw.org/content.asp?ContentID=335>; Allison Hawkins, *Law School-Based Street Law Programs Implement Diversity Initiatives*, STREET LAW INK, Volume II, Number 2, July 2007, <http://www.streetlaw.org/content.asp?ContentID=428>.
- 25 Allison Hawkins, *supra* note 24.
- 26 *Id.*
- 27 Allison Hawkins, *Legal Career Connections – the Corporate Diversity Pipeline Program*, Street Law Ink, Volume I, Number I, February 2006, <http://www.streetlaw.org/content.asp?ContentID=314>.
- 28 *Corporate Legal Diversity Pipeline Program*, <http://www.streetlaw.org/content.asp?ContentID=237>.
- 29 Telephone Interview with Lee Arbetman, *supra* note 23.
- 30 *Id.*
- 31 *Id.*
- 32 *Id.*
- 33 Barry E. Katz, *supra* note 16.
- 34 Alexandra Ashbrook, *supra* note 3.
- 35 Interview with Mary Bird, *supra* note 2.