

The ‘Instant Generation’ Meets the Law: Hill/Tucker Institute Raises Future Attorneys

ELIZABETH M. EBANKS, an attorney with LeClairRyan in Richmond, was giving a talk on cross-examination — a topic interesting enough to hold the attention of most of the twenty-one teenagers in her audience. But she wasn’t counting on it.

She played examples from the movies *Legally Blonde* and *My Cousin Vinny* of cross examination done terribly and done extremely well.

In the conversation that followed, the students were enthusiastic and engaged. What did the lawyers do right, and wrong? she asked. She introduced legal terms — demonstrative evidence, prosecutor, plaintiff.

She touched on legal ethics — “When you’re an attorney, you have to be as good as your word. If you lose your credibility, that’s it.”

Later, Yvette A. Ayala took the lectern and expanded on the lesson. She addressed court etiquette. She told them, “In Virginia, we say, ‘May it please the court, Your Honor, I am Yvette Ayala ...’”

She gave them pointers for the mock trial the students were preparing. Don’t ask a question if you don’t know the answer, because the answer can come back to bite you, she advised: “Cross examination is like handling a snake.”

And she provided reassurance to the student who expressed concern that he doesn’t know how to ask leading questions to draw out the answers he wants.

“You don’t have to be like the people in the movie. Just be yourself,” she said.

Rule No. 1, if you want to volunteer with the Oliver Hill/Samuel Tucker Prelaw Institute: You have to know how to talk to teenagers.

The institute break is a summer program held annually at the University of Richmond to give high school students the experience of college — living in a dorm, eating in a dining hall, and attending classes. The purpose: to teach them about law and, the sponsors hope, motivate some of them to become lawyers.

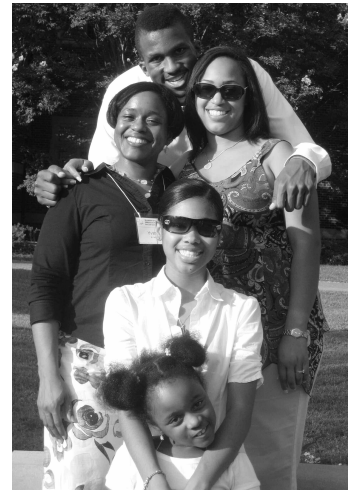
The students at this year’s Hill/Tucker Institute came primarily from Central Virginia, referred by guidance counselors, teachers, and lawyers in the community.

The Virginia State Bar’s Young Lawyers Conference sponsors and does all the work for the weeklong program, with considerable support of time and money from their law firms. The cost of this year’s Institute — about fourteen thousand dollars — was donated primarily by the Verizon Foundation.



1. Left-Right: Students Turquoia Simmons, Porscha Quarles, Darren McLeod, Calvin Walker, and Dominique Connor.

2. Top-bottom, left-right: Hill/Tucker Institute intern Josh Brown, Codirectors Yvette Ayala and Rasheeda N. Matthews, intern Jasmine Johnson, and Ayala’s daughter, Yriannah Richards, who spent the week at the program helping her mother.



Additional donations from Superior Document Services, Lexis-Nexis, and Capital One’s African American

Network supplemented this year’s Institute. Institute volunteers were from law firms LeClairRyan, McGuireWoods, Troutman Sanders, Hunton & Williams, and Harrell & Chambliss, and companies Kaplan, Capital One, Verizon, and Dominion.

The money is donated through the Millennium Diversity Initiative, a nonprofit corporation that Joseph A. Condo established when he was VSB president to provide resources for projects that advance diversity in the legal profession. (See his article, page 16.)

The program itself was started as a pipeline project in 2000 by Jennifer L. McClellan, who now is YLC president. As she reports in her column on page 27, some of the institute’s first graduates are planning to enter law school next year.

This year, Ayala, owner of Dominion Law PLLC, and Rasheeda N. Matthews, a client manager at Capital One, were codirectors of the institute, which does the fundraising; arranges the room, board, and classroom space; sets up transportation for off-campus activities; reviews student applications; and lines up speakers. Twenty speakers — attorneys, Judges Roger Lee Gregory and Judge Gary A. Hicks, and First Lady Anne B. Holton, a former judge — participated this year.

Ayala and Matthews served shifts round-the-clock, teaching, counseling, coaching, supervising, mediating, and consoling.

Rule No. 2, if you want to volunteer: Be prepared to resolve conflicts or soothe feelings.

During a break for lunch, four students gathered to share their experiences of law and lawyers. They were Turquoia Simmons, seventeen, of Highland Springs High School, who is interested in chemical or electric engineering; Darren McLeod, sixteen, of Hermitage High in Henrico County, who aspires to careers in baseball until he's about thirty-one, followed by foreign relations or, maybe, law; Calvin Walker, sixteen, of Huguenot High in Richmond, who envisions a future as a criminal prosecutor; and Dominique Connor, eighteen, of Powhatan High, who sees herself practicing civil law at a big firm.

Connor said, "I want to be able to take care of my parents."

Except for Walker, the students' ideas about lawyers were pretty vague before they came to the institute. "At one point, I did want to be a lawyer, but I don't like to argue a lot," Simmons said. McLeod had gone to middle school with Gov. Tim Kaine's son, and he learned some things when Kaine came to talk.

Walker has a very specific goal: After graduating from law school, he will take the North Carolina bar exam and work in Charlotte in the district attorney's office. "I want to put the big criminals in jail," he said.

Though they've been raised in schools in the Richmond metropolitan area, the students didn't know much about Oliver W. Hill before they came to the institute named for him and his partner in civil rights litigation, Samuel W. Tucker. McLeod had heard of Hill, but "I always thought he was one of the people that helped the lawyers."

They all talked about how grateful they were to their families and the mentors who encouraged them. But they also have concerns about paying for college, whether they can do the work, global warming, future quality of life, and "what's going to happen when we run out of gas."

They also worry about what Walker called "the racism thing." "A lot of us don't give any leeway to other people," he said. McLeod worries about Chinese human rights violations. Simmons concluded, "Racism is always going to be a problem." If people were going to do something about it, "actually, we should have done it like twenty years ago."

Rule No. 3, if you want to volunteer: You have to know how to listen to teenagers.

The students are "unashamed to show their feelings. ... The counselors need not to be afraid to ask questions, and they need to be willing to be real and answer teenagers' questions, which aren't always comfortable," Ayala said. The students will ask if you lived with your boyfriend, if you smoked cigarettes in high school. "You don't have to answer them," she added.

"It is challenging to make the instant generation slow down long enough to make them care about the law," Ayala said. "You have to have an ability to make a profession that's

traditional, so steeped in process, so slow-moving, attractive to kids who are used to an instant society.

"Everything takes forever in law." Teaching them the rewards of legal practice is like "valuing the meal that's made in the slow cooker more than the one that's made in the microwave."

Lawyers who help out with the Institute make long-lasting connections, Ayala said. "It's a great opportunity for attorneys to be re-inspired."

How have the students' impressions of lawyers changed since they've been to the institute?

McLeod was delighted to learn that law is taught by the Socratic method, because he is already versed in that from his high school.

Walker said, "I've learned how trustworthy and honest they are, how they're not in it for the money. There are only a handful of people nowadays that are actually putting forth an effort instead of complaining about things. I think lawyers are those kind of people."

Plans for the 2009 Hill/Tucker Prelaw Institute are underway. To volunteer, contact HillTuckerInstitute@gmail.com.

— Dawn Chase