

Local Bar Associations and Others Educate, Register Voters with *So You're 18* Brochure

by Deirdre Norman

So You're 18, a brochure for young adults written and funded by the VSB Conference of Local Bar Associations, contains information about the rights and responsibilities immediately conferred upon US citizens when they turn 18, including the right to vote, the right to marry, and the right to apply for credit. Other responsibilities covered in the brochure include registering for the Selective Service, jury duty, and being liable for all your actions.

The informative brochure, which is given out free of charge, has been used to great effect by numerous local bars, high school government classes, the Department of Social Services for minors aging out of its programs, election registrars, and many individuals who want to help inform young people about changes in the law that apply to them as soon as they turn 18.

The largest program in Virginia involves the Prince William County Bar Association that has joined with the Prince William County Public Schools and Prince William County Voter Registration to develop a program for high school students using the brochure.

According to Alissa Hudson, the Executive Director of the association, the project began in 1999 and now serves all thirteen high schools in Prince William County and the cities of Manassas and Manassas Park, as well as some alternative education programs. "We have distributed 88,000 brochures since 2000, helping teenagers to understand how the law changes once they reach eighteen. The teachers absolutely love the program,

and so do the attorneys involved. It is so easy to find the ninety volunteer attorneys this program requires."

The volunteer attorneys visit with every high school government class in the 31st Judicial District to talk with the students and distribute the brochure. Other topics the attorneys cover include driving, drunk driving, criminal law once no longer a minor, smart spending and the use of credit, as well as health insurance, wills, and when a person may require a lawyer. Hudson said of the lawyers' efforts, "Our focus with the students is to give them the information they need to make good choices and to be model citizens."

Winston Forrest, Election Communications Coordinator for Prince William County, estimates that so far in the 2015-16 school year the program has reached 3,000 students and, of the approximately 2,400 eligible to register, resulted in 1944 new voter applications. "This is an amazing program that helps young adults understand their rights as well as their responsibilities."

"I tell the students: 'You have a right to free speech and a right to an attorney if you are accused of a crime. You would not give those rights up, so why would you give up the right to vote?' Studies are showing that early voters go on to become frequent voters, and that means that the students will likely be exercising the right to vote for the rest of their lives," Forrest said.

According to Paulette Davidson of the Virginia State Bar, who coordinates the *So You're 18* program, the brochures have also been used by the Hanover County Bar Association where Adam Nelson has been distributing the brochures for fifteen years as an annual Law Day project.

The brochures are also distributed by the Warrenton Bar Association, the



Lawyer John Primeau presents the *So You're 18* program to Manassas Park High School students.

Norfolk Department of Human Services, and a number of Juvenile and Domestic Relations Courts throughout Virginia who hand out the brochures during drivers' licensing ceremonies to better inform young people about the law and their rights.

The Virginia State Bar has designed the brochure to appeal to young people. Illustrated by Madonna Dersch, the VSB's graphic designer, the twenty-eight page brochure features more than 100 hand drawn illustrations and has been styled like a "zine," the underground publications often created and distributed by young people at schools and universities.

The result of the program so far has been better informed young people who understand the many legal changes that occur as they reach the age of majority, as well as the registering of thousands of new voters. The York County Voter Registrar also recently requested 1,250 brochures to be used at student presentations about the importance of registering to vote.

The VSB provides these brochures free of charge. If you are interested in developing such a program with a school or school district in your area, please contact Paulette Davidson at (804) 775-0521, or Davidson@vsb.org.