

LAW WEEK COLORADO



LAW WEEK

COLORADO

Drilling Colorado's Own Pipeline To Diversity In Law

By **Lorenzo A. Trujillo**

TO BECOME A lawyer is to obtain power.

Lawyers make the law, interpret its scope and execute its potentially devastating effect. Yet, if there is unequal access to this most powerful of professions, the law's very effectiveness is eroded and upended. Stratification along racial or socioeconomic lines in our lawyerly class fuels the perception that the deck is stacked in favor of entrenched elites.

This problem can be particularly acute in a place like Colorado, where the state's rapid demographic change must be matched by change in the makeup of those creating and enforcing the mechanisms that put people in jail, dissolve marriages and enforce property rights.

We say justice is blind, but plenty of Coloradans take stock of who is meting out justice. And, unfortunately, the portrait of justice in Colorado and the United States is unrepresentative of the population as a whole. For example, only 4.9 percent of Colorado attorneys (and around 12.7 percent of attorneys nationwide) are persons of color, compared with almost 40 percent of the U.S. population.

An oft-heard lament is that it is difficult to attract diverse lawyers to practice in Colorado. But if Colorado is to make any real progress in diversifying its legal profession, it must rely on innovative strategies. A focused means of addressing the diversity issue is for Colorado to drill its own pipeline by mentoring high-achieving Colorado students to succeed in college and law school. Because of their ties to Colorado, it is much more likely that these students will remain in or return to Colorado after obtaining their law degrees.

In 2014, Federal District Court judge Christine Arguello and members of her Dream Team launched such a pipeline program. Law School ... Sí Se Puede is a four-year, college student mentoring program that advances inclusiveness in the legal profession by helping students



LORENZO TRUJILLO

from Colorado high schools gain the skills, experiences and networks they will need to succeed in law school and as lawyers.

Law School ... Sí Se Puede stands out because it extends its efforts beyond race or color and includes low-income and first-generation students who face challenges in completing college. These students lack access to family members with college and law degrees who can guide them to the internships, classes and professional experiences they need to prepare them for law school. Nonetheless, these students have already demonstrated they are talented and industrious enough to perform at high levels academically in high school, and also should benefit by having the playing field leveled for them.

Roberto Ramírez, one of the initial organizers and a Board Member, describes the effort as implementing "our own version of a social revolution through education to empower students." He continues, "It is amazing to think about where these students can go if they are provided with the right advice and guidance."

Each year, Law School ... Sí Se Puede selects between 12 and 15 rising college freshman as fellows. The program matches each fellow with three mentors: two attorneys and

one law student. The mentors make a four-year commitment to guide the fellows through college with the goal of helping them receive admission to the law school of their choice. The mentors are required to meet with their fellow in person every month, preferably as a group. Many of the mentors encountered — and surmounted — similar obstacles on their path to success in the law.

"Neither of my parents could provide me with the guidance I needed," said Cristal DeHerrera, Denver deputy city attorney. "I had no roadmap to follow and achieved my success as a lawyer through hard work and the generosity of my own mentors. As a leader in the community, I understand that I have the power to change the legal profession by opening doors for others. This is why, despite my busy schedule, I volunteer as a mentor for Law School ... Sí Se Puede."

In order to help the fellows understand and develop skills they will need to be successful in college and law school, in addition to attending the mentoring sessions, the fellows are required to attend exposure programs and skill-building workshops that are held every other month. These sessions include presentations by law school admissions counselors on the admissions process and workshops on personal branding, resume writing, interviewing and securing competitive internships. Finally, access to LSAT preparation courses is recognized as pivotal to success in applying to law schools. Because diverse students face a "shutout" rate of between 45 to 60 percent, primarily based on low LSAT scores, Law School ... Sí Se Puede will provide stipends to its fellows so that they can attend LSAT preparation courses.

The inaugural 2014 class of 12 fellows has two African-American and ten Latino students. Two-thirds are women; all but one are first-generation college students; and more than half are first-generation high school graduates. These talented

students are enrolled at premier colleges and universities in Colorado and elsewhere, where they have already begun to receive high marks for their hard work: one fellow attained a perfect 4.0 GPA, two others had higher than a 3.821 and the remainder had over 3.0.

As a former assistant dean and professor at the University of Colorado Law School, I know firsthand the difficulties that exist in pipeline recruitment. Direct involvement of members of the Bar and current law students to mentor undergraduates will make a difference in preparing underrepresented youth to qualify for law school admission and will go a long way in helping them achieve success as lawyers.

This is why I agreed to assume the reins as president of the Law School ... Sí Se Puede board of directors. The old approaches have not worked, whereas research on mentoring shows that one-on-one guidance and teaching does work — indeed it has worked since the days of Aristotle.

Tomas Manriquez-Hernandez, who attends Syracuse University indicates, "I don't have the blind support of my mentors. They ask difficult questions and through that help me think about what I need to do to achieve my dreams."

I believe that, if we all come together as a community to support this innovative program, in the next ten years, Colorado will see a positive change in the diversity of its legal profession.

Law School...Sí Se Puede is in the process of taking applications for its 2015 class of fellows and is also seeking volunteers to become mentors. More information can be found at: www.lawschoolsisepuede.org. •

Lorenzo A. Trujillo, Ed.D., J.D., is the board president of Law School... Sí Se Puede, former assistant dean and professor at the University of Colorado School of Law and serves as a member of the National Panel for the American Arbitrators Association. His private practice focuses on estate planning/administration, business/corporate law and education law.