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Pipeline Program Sets Students Up for Success Long Before Taking LSAT



By Rebecca Prinster

Frustrated by the persistent assumption by many in the legal field that it was not possible to diversify the profession in Colorado, Judge Christine Arguello decided that she and her colleagues would have to start “raising their own” diverse attorneys.

Arguello, who came from a low-income household and was the first in her family to go to college, says she knew from a young age that she wanted to go to Harvard Law School because it was recognized as the top law school in the country.

“I didn’t even know where Harvard was, but I knew that to get into the best school, I had to be the best student,” she says. “So from the age of 13, I decided that I wasn’t just going to get As, I was going to have the top score. And if I didn’t get the highest score, I would buckle down and study even harder. That outlook has been the basis of all of my efforts; my goal has always been to do the best I can do.”

As the first Latina from Colorado to be admitted to Harvard Law and the first Hispanic U.S. District Court Judge for the District of Colorado, Arguello is well aware of the lack of racial and economic diversity in the legal profession and knows the value of a good mentor. In 2014, she launched Law School...*Sí Se Puede* — which is Spanish for “Yes, you can” — a mentoring and training program, to guide diverse and underrepresented students through college, into law

school, and beyond.

“My main motivation is to have students think of college and then think of grad school,” Arguello says. “They don’t sign their life over to me; if they get through four years of the program and decide they don’t want to be a lawyer, that’s fine. ... They have to make the decision that is right for them. We want them to go into law school with eyes wide open and know what they are getting into.”

The law profession is one of the least diverse in the country; in 2012, only 25 percent of law students and 12 percent of attorneys were people of color. Likewise, only 5 percent of law students come from low-income families. For a state like Colorado, whose Latino population is expanding rapidly, ensuring there are lawyers who reflect the makeup of its residents is a growing concern.

Each year, Law School...*Sí Se Puede* accepts between 10 and 15 incoming college freshmen; this year’s entering cohort has 12 fellows. Although the name of the program seems to imply that Latino and Hispanic students are its focus, any student with a connection to Colorado who is low-income, first-generation, from a minority, or otherwise underrepresented in the legal field is eligible. The decision to limit participation to students with ties to the state was intentional.

“We know that when students are raised or go to high school in Colorado, they stay here or come back

to start their careers,” Arguello says.

“This is the best way to ensure that the people we’re helping are going to help increase the diversity of the legal community in Colorado.”

Each fellow is matched with three mentors — a senior and junior attorney, plus a current law school student — for his or her entire undergraduate career. Shelley Mixon, a partner in intellectual property law at Akerman LLP, is a mentor in the program, and she thinks this early focus is what sets it apart.

“In other mentoring programs that I’ve been involved with, I’ve mentored a lawyer in their first year [of practicing law], and by that point, they’ve already been successful,” she says. “There’s only so much of a difference you can make in their life and career [when you start mentoring them as young lawyers]. I feel like with Law School...*Sí Se Puede*, I’m able to make a greater impact.”

Law School...*Sí Se Puede* is more than a mentoring program, though. Throughout each school year, fellows attend five workshops meant to prepare them for law school and legal careers. Topics covered include study habits, how laws are made, what a lawyer’s job entails, and ways to prepare for the LSAT. Fellows also take personality tests to better understand their decision-making processes and to devise strategies to react to others’ choices — skills which will help them in law school and in their careers.

“It’s important for students to

understand how and why they make decisions and to realize that the person across the table from them may do things differently,” Arguello says. “They need to know how to bridge the gap and not just [have] an emotional response to another person’s actions.”

Arguello says that the Colorado Bar Association has been supportive of Law School... *Sí Se Puede*, and the program has never lacked mentors. However, recruiting fellows has

through Mock Trial, a national high school extracurricular program that Law School... *Sí Se Puede* uses to reach potential applicants. Teams of 12 students argue fictional criminal and civil cases in front of program coaches who serve as the jury and judge. Villa served as captain of her group during her last year of Mock Trial; she says the most rewarding part was seeing her team’s confidence improve.

“The goal is for cases to be presented

Mixon, who also earned a degree in engineering, is one of Villa’s mentors. She says that she became interested in law school by chance and wishes she had had someone to push her in that direction.

Arguello says most of the mentors involved in the program volunteer because they had people in their own lives who supported them during law school and understand the difference that can make, or — like Mixon — wish they had had a mentor to guide them.



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Judge Christine Arguello

presented more of a challenge, as the program is so new and not widely known. She says the key to finding fellows is establishing partnerships with organizations involved with the types of students they are seeking, as well as doing personal outreach to find and attract prospects.

In addition to submitting an application and providing their résumé and high school transcript, prospective fellows must answer essay questions and participate in an interview.

“We want to know more about how they think and about their writing ability, so we require them to answer six essay questions,” Arguello says. “Although these are short essay answers, some students are not willing to invest the time to answer these questions. ... That is an indication to me that they lack motivation and drive.”

Ivette Villa, a second-year fellow and chemical- and bio-engineering major at Colorado State University (CSU), heard about the program

as if they were real, and I found that I loved being on the stand, giving closing statements, and objecting to statements made by my peers,” she says.

Villa attended a STEM high school, and because she enjoyed her science and engineering classes, she decided to major in engineering. But she hopes to make a greater impact by going into law.

Although she had a successful freshman year at CSU, Villa says her grades started slipping in her second year, in part because she moved off campus. To reverse the downward trend, her mentors devised a solution: Villa would stay on campus until all her work was completed for the day. By the end of the semester, she was able to turn her grades around.

“My mentors always keep me on my toes,” Villa says. “They make sure that everything I do is done right and done on time, and they exemplify that by showing up to our meetings on time and making those meetings a priority.”

Arguello now serves on the advisory council for Law School... *Sí Se Puede* and says that she periodically assists groups in other states with setting up their own pipeline programs. Her willingness to share and her dedication to helping students achieve their personal best are two reasons she is a role model for the next generation of diverse attorneys like Villa.

“One of the main reasons I want to be a lawyer is to make a difference,” Villa says. “One of my biggest inspirations is Judge Arguello because she pushes me to do my best. ... I’m very proud of her and look up to her as a mentor, and I hope that one day I can be in her shoes and help students, too.” ●

Rebecca Prinster is a senior staff writer for *INSIGHT Into Diversity*. To develop a Law School... *Sí Se Puede* program in your state, email lsssp.colorado@gmail.com.