

## Giving youths a head start on learning law

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Divitta Alexander finds that most attorneys agree it would have been helpful early on in life to have had a better understanding of the breadth of opportunities within a legal career.

Earlier exposure to and understanding of the law can help identify a fit or interest and lead to a lawyer moving sooner into a specific sector. Without it, many practitioners are left to find their own way, according to Alexander, an attorney at Cannon Heyman and Weiss LLP.

“Most of us went into law with the idea that we want to be a lawyer but not much beyond that,” she said. “So it’s about understanding, for example, that there is litigation vs. transactional as two major segments of the career. And, then, even within the law, just the idea that law applies to every single industry. Any type of business has legal support.”

She and fellow attorneys such as John Schmidt, a partner at Phillips Lytle, try to provide youngsters with that type of exposure to the law through their affiliation with the Boy Scouts of America and its Explorer Program. They helped start an Explorer Program focused on boys and girls ages 14-20 who are interested in law and government.

A group of attorneys and other players in the project started meeting last summer to brainstorm. It launched in September and will run throughout the school year. So far there have been three meetings, each focusing on a different subject area. Meetings are coupled with a field trip closely related to what is covered.

“Typically, what is people’s exposure to the law, really, unless they’re involved in a litigation? It’s TV or there might be some aspects of personal involvement in the legal system,” said Schmidt, president of the Greater Niagara Frontier Council of the Boy Scouts. “Are either one of those really good advertisements for a career in this profession? We’re trying to provide that for them.”

The goal is to mentor youngsters and teach them life lessons, such as why it is important to do well in school.



Speaking at Oracle Charter School were Judge Kevin Carter, left, Legislator Kevin Hardwick, attorney/moderator Kyle Didone, attorney Cavette Chambers and Mayor Byron Brown.

“When I was in high school and I wanted to be a lawyer, all I knew was that I was smart and that I argued a lot,” Schmidt said with a chuckle. “Here we’re trying to give the kids everything from sitting in on city court to a tour of the law school and the holding center.”

He and Alexander are on the local board of the Boy Scouts, which offer a career exploration program. There’s already one established locally with law enforcement — Erie County Sheriff Tim Howard has been heavily involved — as well as one focused on firefighting. But there was never one established for law and government until now. They realized this was an area that most students don’t get to learn about through the education track or real-life experience.

“Usually you have to look to internships or relationships you have with people to get that type of exposure,” Alexander said. “With teachers you have student teachers and with medicine you have residency, but with law you don’t have that.”

The idea came to Schmidt after he attended a national Boy Scouts meeting in Atlanta where one of the presentations outlined the Explorer Program, which focuses on 18 career fields. He inquired if there was a section specifically for those who want to become lawyers and was excited to hear that it did exist. It just needed to be started in the Buffalo area.

After communicating with representatives of the Boys Scouts of America, the locals put a plan in place. Alexander suggested Oracle Charter School, where she’s a board member, as a place that might be interested in housing the legal Explorer Program. They met with Brian Palowski, dean of students, and he welcomed the program.

The inner-city, high school-aged population of Oracle was in need of being served by such a program, according to Alexander. Also, Oracle is in a central location on Delaware Avenue so it’s accessible to students from the nearly dozen other Western New York schools that participate, she said.

They discussed what legal issues and topics to cover, Schmidt said. At the first session, there also was a questionnaire about what participants and their parents wanted the program to cover.

“We thought about what would appeal to youth and what would they find interesting, and we put together a program that the legal community and political world have very much bought into,” he said.

A priority was to ensure that there were insight and exposure to areas of the law that are likely to affect everyday people but most might not think about regularly, Alexander said. The program started with subjects that would attract students such as civil litigation with William Mattar, known for his law firm’s “Hurt in a Car?” slogan. There’s also been a criminal law session with an FBI representative, a presentation by the Amherst K-9 Unit and a tour of the Erie County Holding Center.

“All of those were very interesting to the kids and I think were helpful in drawing them in,” Alexander said. “Though the real test as to how receptive they are to the less-sensational topics, we’ll learn in the next few months.”

The latest session, in January, was titled “Life in Government” and featured Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown, Legislator Kevin Hardwick, Erie County Family Court Judge Kevin Carter and Cavette Chambers, assistant City of Buffalo corporation counsel. They explained what they did, answered questions and talked about opportunities that might be available to youths. Brown stressed that just showing up and being interested was the first step to success.

Sessions have attracted 20 to 40 students, depending on the timing, weather and topic, according to Schmidt. He recently attended a national meeting for training and when the Explorer Program for 2016 was discussed, was delighted to hear that the local post was being cited as an example of what it takes to get out the message to youths with career aspirations.

“In the grand scheme of things, we’re giving the kids a carrot,” Schmidt said.