

Oh, the possibilities

Internship program shows commitment to diversity, opens eyes to options

Do you remember the old Dr. Seuss book "Oh, the Thinks You Can Think!"?

The idea of the book's first line — "Oh, the thinks you can think up if only you try!" — kept running through my mind as I talked to folks in Grand Rapids about the program introducing minority high-schoolers to the law.

Hey, I'm a dad of three children. Those books and the rules to live by are permanently etched in my mind.

The law portion of the Grand Rapids University Prep Academy internships was coordinated by the Managing Partner Diversity Collaborative Agreement with the Grand Rapids Bar Association.

That's a recently finalized compact by the Bar and the major law firms (at the partner level) in Grand Rapids to implement a comprehensive diversity program, and they have.

This outreach to high school students is only part of that comprehensive diversity program. But the additions and changes made to the program in the last year and the commitment of time really illustrates these legal leaders have a passion for improving the region.

What I got from this program is that if only we can show kids the possibilities, they will know what is possible.

Growing up in Detroit, I was unaware of what was possible, thinking the only good job was at a factory. Who knew? It took a lot longer, and the road was rougher before I found that there are other options.

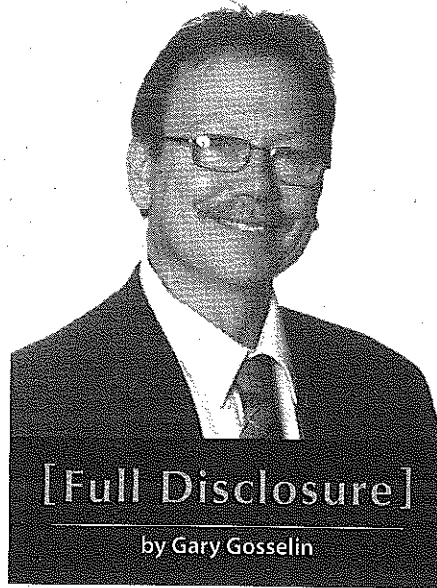
These teens now know what's possible.

They not only got to see what a lawyer's career may look like, but every other career in the legal field, too.

These seven high-schoolers also learned that these law firms are committed to following through, providing LSAT scholarships, mentoring and outreach. More resources for students are expected to be added as the program evolves.

I had the opportunity to talk to ninth-grader Ayanna and 10th-grader Alaysha, and both were impressed at the scope of the program.

This is Alaysha's second year in the program, and she wants to be an attorney and/or an FBI agent. She really en-



joyed the changes this year, with more interaction including a mock trial, a week at The Thomas M. Cooley Law School and visits to courthouses and various law firms.

"We had fun, especially during the mock trial ... we went through every step, we had witnesses, faced the judge and gave opening and closing statements," Alaysha told me.

She was a prosecutor (and gave an opening statement) and was a witness. And she was genuinely interested.

"Part of the [diversity and inclusion] action plan has to do with pipeline development, and specifically is reaching out to students at a younger age, in high school and even middle school," Varnum LLP diversity and inclusion counsel Joy Fossel told me.

It was a hoot, said Fossel, who served as a tour guide, mentor and teacher for the day at Varnum and several field trips to courts to see how they are set up, how they operate, and even the strict security measures they have.

Ayanna, the ninth-grader, said it has been a good experience, and noted that one of her mentors mentioned that one of their best law students was a pediatrician, and Ayanna said she may try to do both.

She was particularly impressed with the Varnum offices and got a chance to

see technology like Skype used for conference calls.

Ayanna played two witnesses in the mock trial, and thoroughly enjoyed it. She said the support and care they took at Cooley was first-rate, and she would consider them as a choice when the time comes to enroll.

"We're taking [the diversity initiative] very seriously," Fossel said. "And some parts of the plan are so exciting, some firms have [already] gone forward ..."

They are now forming a joint marketing committee using marketing people from the larger firms and showcasing Grand Rapids and the diversity of people in the community.

"People think that's just a Dutch community and it's not — it's so much more," Fossel said. "And people will be learning more about that effort as time goes on."

Of course, on the Grand Rapids University Prep Academy side, a lot of work must be done for the students to participate in the law internships as well as internships in other professions, running concurrently.

I had the opportunity to speak with Deb Kalinka, a liaison and the Teen CEO (Career Exploration Opportunities) coordinator for the academy, and with Daniel Williams, principal of the academy.

"We have been just incredibly grateful to every business that's willing to take a student; they really want to make sure it's meaningful, and that they have time and resources to make an impact," Kalinka said. "Our kids are creating these relationships with these mentors, and whether or not they go into this field, they will have the experience base."

Those possibilities again.

"Urban education is an all-hands-on-deck situation," Williams told me. "Everyone from every part of a city needs to be involved and engaged in the process, this is our work force, this is the future of our city ..."

"Oh, the thinks you can think up if only you try!"

If you would like to comment on this column, please contact Gary Gosselin at (248) 865-3103 or gary.gosselin@mi.lawyersweekly.com.