

Lawyers Expand the Diversity Pipeline: Mentoring Page Scholars Through the Page Education Foundation

Disproportionate differences between the racial composition of the legal profession and the general population in the United States are nothing new. In 2000, people of color represented over thirty percent of the United States population, but only ten percent of the legal profession. Demographic reports for 2010 show minimal changes. As our country diversifies—with projections that minorities will hit fifty percent of the general population by 2050—the legal profession must become more representative of the clients we serve. A more representative legal profession cultivates public confidence and trust in the legal system; it helps ensure fundamental fairness for society.

Improving diversity in the legal profession requires improving diversity in the pipeline into the profession. Pipeline initiatives focus on low-income minorities, who often lack role models in higher education and professional careers. By reaching youth as far back as pre-kindergarten, such programs lay a foundation for students to invest in college education and consider law amongst other professional careers. Although no panacea, pipeline initiatives improve the likelihood of future attorneys of color.

In Minnesota, one such initiative is the Page Education Foundation. Established in 1988 by Minnesota Supreme Court Justice Alan C. Page and his wife, Diane Sims Page, the Foundation encourages youth of color to pursue higher education. It awards annual, renewable grants to minority college students in Minnesota—Page Scholars—based on their commitment to education and mentoring youth. As part of their scholarship experience, Page Scholars mentor kindergarten

through eighth grade children of color, focusing on literacy and tutoring. They also gain mentors in the community, with whom their interests and professional aspirations align. Each Page Scholar is mentor and mentee, responsible for passing on what they receive.

A Page Scholar's Story, Full Circle

In 1990, DeGalynn Wade was a Page Scholar. The youngest of three children in North Minneapolis, Wade was the first in her family to finish high school. Growing up and hearing gunshots outside her home, as a child she wondered how to help the people around her. Against this backdrop, Wade knew at age seven that she wanted to be a lawyer. When she won the Page Scholarship at seventeen years old and renewed it through college and law school, the Page Education Foundation assigned a young student for her to mentor each year. The Foundation also assigned Justice Page, then a lawyer at the Minnesota Attorney General's Office, to mentor Wade.

Wade's early experiences as a Page Scholar made a lasting impression on her. As a mentor, Wade regularly helped her mentees with homework. On two occasions, both over the Christmas holiday, she took in two mentees who faced turbulent times at home. Through these experiences, Wade saw that too many children of color lack role models and close relationships with successful professionals. In response, she forged even stronger connections with her mentees, who have completed college and are pursuing graduate degrees. They remain in touch to this day.

As a mentee herself, Wade found Justice Page's guidance invaluable. She would call Justice Page with questions about academic scholarships, applying to law school, and working in the legal profession. The two would meet for lunch and other events sponsored by the Page Education Foundation. For Wade, Justice Page was "a voice to help me reason, someone in my corner all the time." He guided Wade on her personal quest to become a lawyer. He connected her with other lawyers to learn about different areas of law. Wade reflects, "Justice Page helped me accomplish my dreams by assisting with the groundwork." By 1998, the groundwork was ready when Justice Page swore Wade into the Minnesota Bar. When she turned to him to utter, "we did it," Justice Page returned, "*YOU* did it."

Today, Wade has come full circle, guided by her passion to help others through her profession and personally. As a family law practitioner, she counsels clients often on a pro bono basis. As a Page Scholar alumna, she keeps active with the Foundation. Wade identifies potential Page Scholars, helping them apply for the scholarship. She recruits mentors for Page Scholars. Wade also raises money and strategizes with the Foundation about long-term plans. Since 1999, she has mentored more than ten Page Scholars, getting to know them on their terms and in their space. Wade reassures mentees that she is available to them—anytime, anywhere. Her goal? To give back everything she received from the Foundation.

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Justice Alan Page, swearing mentee and former Page Scholar, DeGalynn Wade, into the Minnesota Bar.

The Federal Bar Association's Involvement

The Federal Bar Association's involvement with the Page Education Foundation grew from conversations among Minnesota judges, attorneys, and law school deans about the pipeline into the legal profession. Concerned about the federal bar's lack of diverse representation, the FBA's Diversity Committee brainstormed ways to encourage youth to consider legal careers. Spearheading the initiative in 2007, United States District Judge Donovan W. Frank and his Judicial Assistant, Becky Baertsch, met with Diane Sims Page at the Foundation to discuss how attorneys could mentor Page Scholars. Baertsch, who previously worked with Justice Page, saw that attorneys could offer students a preview of college, law school, and the legal profession. Judge Frank, a strong advocate of diversity in the legal profession, "wanted to show young people the best that law can offer—that it can improve lives and the world around us."

To recruit mentors, Judge Frank, Artika Tyner of the University of St. Thomas Law School, Tricia Matzek of UnitedHealth Group, and Annie Huang of Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi L.L.P. embarked on "road shows" to local law firms. At these road shows, Judge Frank introduced the Foundation's work in the context of the diversity pipeline. Tyner, a former Page Scholar, would recall how her mentor Matzek helped her navigate a path to law and learn different ways to effect change with a law degree. Matzek shared how she and Tyner built and maintained their relationship. Huang would stress the importance of diversity in the legal profession. Together, they recommended the mentoring program for anyone interested in developing the next generation of community leaders and professionals.

Current Mentor Experiences

Just as Justice Page took DeGalynn Wade under his wing, members of the Federal Bar Association are doing the same for other Page Scholars. Bill Hittler, an attorney at Nilan Johnson Lewis, P.A. and the Foundation's 2010 Mentor of the Year, mentors because "Our networks and opportunities have much to do with the environment in which we are raised." So he opens doors to the legal profession for students with less access. In addition to regular coffees and lunches, Hittler invites mentees to accompany him to court. He introduces mentees to judges and other attorneys. He tells them about graduate opportunities in law. Moved by his mentees' confidence, poise, and motivation, Hittler takes pride in their successes and willingness to share their paths with him.

With his mentees, Judge Donovan W. Frank conveys that law is an attainable career. He believes that "no matter where people grow up, they rise to the level of expectation around them. Where some are surrounded by lower expectations, we should help raise them." Growing up in a small farm town in southern Minnesota, Judge Frank was the first in his extended family to attend college. Judge Frank shares his background to encourage students to set high goals and expectations. "If I can become a federal judge," he tells them, "you can, too." Judge Frank personalizes relationships with mentees over meals and lunch; he visits their neighborhoods in Brooklyn Park. By learning about and encouraging their hopes and dreams, Judge Frank helps mentees view a legal career as a realistic goal.

Shannon O'Toole, an attorney at Winthrop Resources Corporation, dispels misconceptions of the legal pro-

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Bill Hittler, attorney at Nilan Johnson Lewis, P.A., and Page Scholar Mai Thao (College of St. Benedict 2011 graduate).

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fession. Recognizing that many students view judges as “old white men,” attorneys as either prosecutors or public defenders, and the legal process as a “quick, theatrical world of snap judgments,” O’Toole tells mentees about her work. She introduces them to accomplished women of color, including Minnesota Court of Appeals Judge Wilhelmina M. Wright. O’Toole brings students to appellate arguments at the Eighth Circuit and Minnesota Court of Appeals, after which they discuss their observations. Through her mentoring, O’Toole exposes students to the many sides of a case, the numerous considerations of a judge, and the various ways that individuals can channel their strengths in a legal career.

Become a Mentor

The Page Education Foundation seeks more mentors from the Minnesota Chapter of the Federal Bar Association. This year, the Foundation supports 540 Page Scholars. Of the 100 total mentors at the Foundation, twenty are attorneys.

For potential mentors who worry about the time commitment, Bill Hittler comments that mentoring is “surprisingly easy—you’re sharing what you already know and adding to the skills that students already have.” The Foundation encourages mentors to contact their mentees at least once per month, whether by email, phone, or in person. Even a few minutes can

mean a great deal to students who seek a meaningful relationship with a professional.

On connecting with mentees, Shannon O’Toole recommends being persistent and friendly because many students find lawyers intimidating. She further advises listening to mentees to find out what they want, what they think is useful and interesting—whether or not related to law. Then consider what you can offer. Judge Frank elaborates on not assuming what mentees think and feel: “Where many of us have college and law degrees, we assume that we understand what people face against poverty and discrimination. But to meet and get to know a Page Scholar—you begin to realize how little you understand about their perceptions of the world.” Judge Frank continues to appreciate how much he learns from his mentees as they learn from him.

By mentoring through the Page Education Foundation, we come one step closer to understanding others, and we inspire the next generation to consider a career in law.

Andrea Yang is a member of the Diversity Committee, and an associate at Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi L.L.P. Photos courtesy of DeGalynn Wade and The Page Education Foundation.