

Ad Hominem

COMMENTARY AND CRITICISM

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A challenge to San Francisco law firms

By Richard Zitrin

The Bar Association of San Francisco's minority law student scholarship selection program got off to a good start.

Founded in 1998, the program was designed to provide affirmative assistance for disadvantaged students, especially people of color, after the passage of Prop 209, which ended affirmative action at California's state schools. At Boalt Hall School of Law, perhaps the best state law school in the country, 20 African-Americans matriculated for the fall of 1996, but only one entered in 1997.

When the initial call went out to the legal and business community to sponsor a scholarship, firms and companies responded with 18 scholarships for the class entering in the fall of 1998, and 18 more for fall 1999. Twelve law firms and three corporations contributed in 1998, and eight law firms and two corporations in 1999. At least in part due to the scholarship programs, Boalt's African-American population started rising again.

But now the program has faltered. The response in 1998 and 1999 was overwhelming compared to the response since. In year three, not a single law firm contributed a new scholarship. The only scholarship starting in 2000 was from Union Bank — its second such contribution. In 2001, there was not a single scholarship. This year, we had about 70 applicants for three scholarships — only one of which was guaranteed for three years.

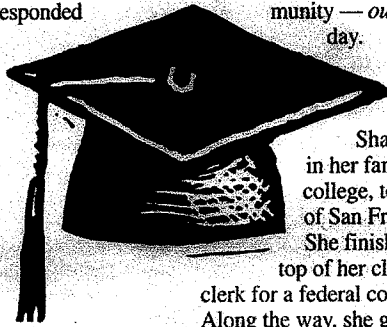
Even in 1998 and 1999, the scholarships that were contributed were not nearly enough. Some lasted only one year, while most others were only \$5,000 per year, hardly enough to put much of a dent in a law student's school debt, much less eliminate it.

What happened? The dot-com flameout, the recession, inflated associate salaries, which are looking more bloated each passing day, lack of a consistent promotional campaign, law firm layoffs. And indifference.

Once out of sight, these scholarships were out of mind.

The cost of losing these scholarships has been the loss of dozens of students. Some couldn't get to law school at all. Some went elsewhere, understandably fearful of the daunting cost of Bay Area living.

Through their diverse lives and experiences, these students would have enormously enriched the collective wealth of our own knowledge and wisdom about the world in which we live and work. We have been deprived of wonderful young men and women who will make fine lawyers, and who will — if they get enough money to avoid oppressive debt — give something back to their community — our community — one day.



The scholarship that I was proud to be associated with helped

Shanna Bradford, the first in her family to graduate from college, to attend the University of San Francisco School of Law.

She finished law school near the top of her class and was invited to clerk for a federal court of appeals judge. Along the way, she got a good law school education and enriched not only her own life but those of many of us who got to know her.

But what about the cost of such a scholarship to a law firm? After all, these are tough economic times. When you crunch the numbers, the reality is that these scholarships could virtually be paid from a law firm's petty-cash drawer.

Take a 200-lawyer firm. Let's say it has 100 partners. Posit that the average profit per partner is a relatively modest (for this town) \$300,000 per year. Now let's give the scholarship student \$15,000 per year — the kind of money that can make a real impact on law school debt. That adds up to a whopping \$150 a year per partner — less than Bar Association dues.

I submit that there's not a single sizable law firm in town that could not afford to give deserving minority students \$3 — even \$5 or \$10 — of each partner's draw each week.

A great lawyer, William Reece Smith, now well into his 80s, a senior partner in Tampa's largest firm, former American Bar Association president and chair of the ABA's Professionalism Commission, once told me, in his slow, polite but firm Southern way, "I do believe that we could get by with 5 percent less." On that occasion, Reece Smith was talking about pro bono work, but the point here is the same: These scholarships are as affordable to our law firms as much as law school is *unaffordable* to the recipients.

By the way, it's not all give and no take. It's not just the free publicity. You get to be part of advancing the goals we so treasure in this city, that make San Francisco so special — the tolerance, acceptance and nurturing of cultural differences and diversity. You get to be a mentor to an outstanding young man or woman. You get the satisfaction of seeing that student achieve, maybe helping her along the way, and the simple feel-good pride at seeing "your" student get her degree. And you may even form bonds that last a lifetime; in our case, with USF student Bradford, who came to be a member of our extended family and a valuable role model for my daughter. This week my daughter wrote a high school essay on fulfilling the American Dream. The example she chose was Bradford.

I hereby challenge every San Francisco Bay Area law firm that can afford it — you all know who you are — to donate \$15,000 a year to the bar's minority scholarship fund. I read through dozens of worthy applications this summer. Only three could be chosen. Next year I'd like to read through hundreds of applications and choose dozens of worthy, capable law students to help along their way.

It's up to you. And it's easy. Just call the director of the program, Elizabeth Tom, at BASF at 415-782-8975. Operators are standing by.

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