

# COLUMBIA NEWS

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## **Program Exposes Harlem 8th Graders to Legal Profession and Top Colleges** *Legal Outreach benefits from Columbia funding and expertise*

For a group of 30 or so Harlem eighth graders, being a practicing lawyer isn't just a future aspiration, it is a hands-on experience as a local judge critiques their courtroom performances in Legal Outreach mock trials.

Every year, [Legal Outreach](#) sponsors the Columbia Summer Law Institute, where eighth-graders spend two days in a real courtroom delivering opening and closing statements and cross-examining witnesses as if they were in a real-life legal case.

Founded in the 1980s, Legal Outreach is a college preparatory organization that guides eighth-graders from high school to college, then potentially into law school and the legal profession. The program receives funding from [Columbia Community Service](#) and also gets the assistance of administrators and students from [Columbia Law School](#).

*American Lawyer* magazine has called the organization “arguably the legal profession’s best example of an early-intervention pipeline program—and one of the few with a long-term track record.” Graduates of the program have gone on to schools such as Smith, Middlebury, Harvard and Columbia.

This July, Legal Outreach scholars received instruction in trial practice at Columbia Law School, where they learned the components of a proper opening argument, how to cross-examine a witness and how to close in convincing fashion, says Executive Director James O’Neal, also an adjunct professor at Columbia Law School.



**A student cross-examines a fellow Legal Outreach scholar during the 2006 mock trials.**



**A student cross-examines a fellow student during the 2006 mock trials, while parents and other Legal Outreach scholars observe from the gallery.**

The students' skills will be put to the test in a mock trial competition in Brooklyn Supreme Court Aug. 1 and 2.

“So many kids in urban communities like Harlem really don't have a vision of what the future can hold and what they can become,” O'Neal says. “I lived in the neighborhood for 10 years, and urban youth really don't have a chance to interact with professionals. They don't

see lawyers every day; they don't see accountants; they don't see investment bankers or management consultants. When these students are in actual courtrooms, asking questions and delivering statements before real judges, they feel empowered.”

Seventy percent of the students are African American and Latino. About the same percentage complete the program, and 100 percent of graduates go on to four-year colleges. This year's students have garnered acceptances at University of California, Berkeley; Emory; Tufts; Colby; Smith and Haverford.

Legal Outreach also fills a critical need at Columbia Law School, where students must complete a minimum of 40 hours of pro bono work to graduate, says [Ellen Chapnick](#), dean for [social justice initiatives](#).

One student who has benefited from Legal Outreach's preparation is 31-year-old Sandy Santana. The Harvard College and Columbia Law alum practiced for six years at a corporate firm before returning to Legal Outreach as its deputy director.

“I had great parents and they were very helpful to me, but I don't think my parents could have sat down with me, given their socioeconomic background, and said, you know, ‘This is the difference between a top-tier college and another type of college, and here's what you need to get to a top university.’ I think that's the situation a lot of our kids are in.”

After they complete the program, Legal Outreach students are further exposed to the law through internships. More than 30 firms have made a commitment to the program, including such major firms as Sullivan & Cromwell, Skadden, Cleary Gottlieb, Orrick, Gibson Dunn, and Kramer Levin.

“We have asked our interns to tackle complicated issues involving trademark law, contracts and damages,” says attorney Jeremy Cohen of Kramer Levin. “They’ve responded with enthusiasm, creativity and intellectual curiosity of a level you might expect from law students or actual lawyers, not 10th graders.”

Dean Chapnick says the performances at the mock trials are so impressive that she says to herself, “I would hire that person!” because each student is “very verbal, very quick and has a lot of poise.”

Carolina Ramirez, 17, who attended P.S. 218 and Washington Irving high school, reflected on her experience at Legal Outreach: “At first, I was skeptical because I never had a positive perception of the law or realized how many aspects there are to it. In my neighborhood, the only side I saw was police officers. But my view has widened through Legal Outreach and the Columbia Law Institute. It’s opened my eyes that law encompasses many different areas and a lot of good can be done with it.”

Growing up in Harlem, she didn’t know Columbia existed until her eighth-grade year. “Columbia and Legal Outreach have become my second home,” says Ramirez, who is attending Tufts University, where she plans to major in international studies, in the fall. She already has her law school picked out, too: Columbia.

– *Written by Alex Lyda.*

Published: Aug. 1, 2007

Last modified: Aug 06, 2007