

Taking the 'A' Train

James O'Neal '82 knows it goes though Harlem and

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HILE MOST OF HIS classmates were busy searching for jobs during their third year at HLS, James O'Neal '82 was searching his soul.

"I saw myself as a community activist who could use my skills to serve poor, urban communities, but I had no idea what form that would take," said O'Neal, who didn't see an easy fit in the legal services work he'd tried during law school. "I started thinking creatively about what I could do to really change outcomes in people's lives and how I could use the law as a mechanism for helping especially young people improve the quality of their life opportunities."

O'Neal, who grew up in Atlanta during the civil rights struggle, took his cue from a book he'd read as a teen, Claude Brown's "Manchild in the Promised Land," about an African-American boy growing up in Harlem. "I started to think about going to a community like Harlem to serve people who did want more for their lives but didn't know how to get where they wanted to go," he said.

Indeed O'Neal went straight from HLS to Harlem, with a public service fellowship funded by his classmates and a proposal to teach a law course for kids. Several high schools took him on, he said, "partly because they couldn't believe someone from Harvard Law School wanted to teach in Harlem or Bedford-Stuyvesant."

His constitutional law class was a hit, but O'Neal noticed that students sought his advice about more practical legal issues such as those that arise in families or between landlords and tenants or with the police. The community law course he developed in response to students' questions was the genesis of the program he heads today. Legal Outreach, co-founded with a fellow community activist in 1983, uses a law curriculum to prepare inner-city youth in New York City to address problems in their communities and to inspire them to strive for college and professional school.

O'Neal initially used mock trials and field trips to courts, law firms and law schools to engage the teenagers, but he soon realized the lessons wouldn't go far if he didn't also help the students build strong academic skills.

"They weren't getting college-prep level classes, and they didn't have the transcripts they'd need to go to college," said O'Neal, who decided to catch kids earlier—in middle school—in order to set them on an academic path that could lead to college.

By 1989, with a teaching staff and revised curriculum, Legal Outreach, in addition to working with individual schools, welcomed six students into a four-year after-school College Bound program that pushed them to excel in academics and gave them a goal to graduate and enroll in college.

Since then, Legal Outreach has seen 176 students graduate from the College Bound program and 74 percent of them have gone to many of the country's top colleges and universities—including Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Swarthmore, Cornell and NYU.

"Two of those first six kids are now lawyers who are very active in helping our program," said O'Neal. Other former students have gone on to graduate work in a range of professional fields, he said. "It's really so exciting to see what they're doing."

Legal Outreach now offers law-related courses to numerous middle-schoolers in the five boroughs each year. With 11 full-time and 38 part-time staff, O'Neal no longer teaches but focuses instead on fundraising and on developing new ways to overcome barriers that still block many children from getting a quality education.

"My wish for the future is to develop supports for the students after they get into college—to help them find the time and money to prepare for the LSATs," said O'Neal. "It's momentum. When you see what poverty can do—when students decide to stop the program or defer college because they have to work to survive, you see why it's really hard to develop a true pipeline to achieve diversity in the legal profession." *

By Margie Kelley | PHOTOGRAPHED BY ANDREA ARTZ, NEW YORK CITY, DEC. 12, 2005



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