



Young lives. Old problems. New solutions.



Courtesy of Nick Chiles/The Hechinger Report | Caption

Harvard Law grad helps low-income students aim high

FOCUS

James O'Neal started with the idea of getting students interested in school by getting them interested in the law. His initial idea has expanded to helping increase the ranks of high-schoolers who get to – and through – top tier colleges.

Nick Chiles

The Hechinger Report

JANUARY 3, 2018 | NEW YORK — When Ismelda Mejia, a junior at a large public high school in the Bronx, was invited to the principal's office earlier this fall along with nine of her classmates, she was thrilled to discover the reason why. Her GPA placed her among the top 10 students in her class. In fact, Ismelda was No. 3.

But after the principal and college counselor praised the students for their academic achievements, the rest of the message fell flat. The administrators presented the students with what Mejia considered a surprisingly narrow set of options: They could attend one of the city or state's public colleges, known as the CUNYs (City University of New York) and

SUNYs (State University of New York), or they could find a job.

“ ‘You guys have really high grades, so we expect you to be able to at least go to a SUNY,’ ” Ismelda recalls staff telling the group. “ ‘But if not, here's a list of things you can do without having to go to college.’ ”

Ismelda, a student with Ivy League aspirations — she has her sights set on Brown University — was appalled. Although her Dominican-born mother did not attend college, Ismelda plans to become a lawyer and specialize in representing children who've been abused. Three years ago, she took a big step toward realizing that ambition. She enrolled in a Queens-based afterschool program, Legal Outreach, founded by James O'Neal. It encourages low-income students to attend the nation's top schools — and prepares them to thrive once they get there.

“They're providing the kind of support that's just not out there, that's only provided by a handful of programs,” says Danielle Pulliam, a program officer with the Pinkerton Foundation, which has supported the group since 1996. “James O'Neal has found the secret sauce in terms of what's needed: consistent caring adults in a young person's life, but also letting them see what's possible by having high standards.”

Bucking conventional wisdom

Conventional wisdom among guidance counselors holds that high-poverty students may struggle at the nation's elite colleges, so placing them in less competitive environments offers them more opportunity for success. A 2012 study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that most high-achieving, low-income students don't apply to any competitive colleges. A separate study of 30 million college students from 1999 to 2013 revealed that while the number of children from low-income families attending four-year institutions rose rapidly during the 2000s, the share at selective colleges barely budged. This was despite efforts by schools such as those in the Ivy League to modify tuition policies to attract more low-income students.

Mr. O’Neal has dedicated the past 35 years to challenging the kind of thinking that he believes holds low-income students back.

Started with the goal of getting students motivated to perform in school by sparking an interest in a legal career, the organization has evolved into a broader college prep program that offers everything from writing courses and summer internships with blue-chip New York law firms to SAT prep and workshops to help students and their parents prepare for college applications and life.

Students are recommended for the program by their teachers and must come from families that earn below a certain income threshold. Through its College Bound program, summer legal institute, and parent workshops, the organization serves about 400 students and 70 families each year.

Once they get to college, Legal Outreach graduates tend to do well. Nationally, only 18 percent of high school graduates from high-poverty schools achieve a four-year college degree, compared with 52 percent of graduates from more affluent schools, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. By contrast, roughly 79 percent of recent Legal Outreach alumni graduated college within four years, and 93 percent finished in six. Approximately 78 percent of the program’s graduates last year attended colleges considered “highly” or “very” selective, including: Yale, Cornell, Columbia, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Carnegie Mellon, Swarthmore, and Morehouse.

“The opportunities at that level are very different than what you are going to get at a local community college,” says Bethsheba Cooper, co-director of Legal Outreach, who has worked alongside Mr. O’Neal for 34 years. “You’re talking about learning from people who are the best in the game.”

Making change, not money

In 1982, just weeks after finishing Harvard Law School, O’Neal found his way to New York. Instead of accepting a lucrative offer from a law firm, he decided his future lay in making change, not money. He had no training as a teacher, but he persuaded a high school principal to allow him to teach a law elective. O’Neal was convinced that if he could just get students excited about the law, they would find the motivation to propel themselves all the

way to law school, a path he felt could transform the economic fortunes of entire families.

Standing in front of a classroom of 11th- and 12th-graders at the high school in Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, O’Neal had a startling revelation. Some of the students who sat before him were just as skilled as his Harvard classmates at dissecting an argument.

“They came up with fascinating arguments to support whatever side they were on,” he recalls. “For a second I thought, Had some of these kids gone to law school and just not told me?”

But with his revelation came a bracing splash of cold reality: The students might possess nimble minds, but they lacked the basic skills to surmount the educational challenges that awaited them on the way to a law degree.

“Even though so many were good thinkers, they hadn’t acquired the ability to express themselves in standard English, orally or in writing,” he says. “The public education system had failed these kids.”

O’Neal started a program to introduce eighth graders to legal issues common in their communities — police use of force, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect. He also started a mock trial competition — and began to hire staff. With the mock trials, O’Neal saw students surprise even themselves when they realized they could stand in front of a room and present a cogent argument.

But he and his staff soon realized they still weren’t doing enough. He would come across students who’d impressed him as eighth graders and discover they were floundering in high school. They felt lost in schools with thousands of kids, where they received little attention and support from staff.

“I was operating under the assumption that what they needed was motivation at an early enough stage to discipline themselves and apply themselves toward their dreams,” he said. “But that was naïve.”

A focus on preparation

So with no real funding to support it, in 1989 O’Neal opened an after-school study center for

high-schoolers in Harlem, starting with just eight students.

Each year, O'Neal — joined by Ms. Cooper — began adding new elements to the program, and bringing it to more students. Early on, Saturday writing classes were born. (Nick Chiles, the author of this piece, served as a writing instructor from 1994 to 2004.) But a year-long, once-a-week class wasn't enough. Students needed writing instruction all four years of high school, with the first year devoted exclusively to grammar. Next came the summer law internships at law firms, then the mentoring program, and the constitutional law debates.

Courtesy of Nick Chiles/The Hechinger Report | Caption

Today, Legal Outreach operates with an annual budget of \$2.3 million, about \$5,764 per participant. There are 17 full-time staff members and 60 part-time.

Carol Van Atten, vice president of the Charles Hayden Foundation, which focuses on at-risk children in the Northeast, said she's impressed by O'Neal's willingness to experiment. "Some things have worked, some things haven't. He doesn't worry about what the funder thinks," said Van Atten, whose fund has given Legal Outreach \$1.7 million over the past two decades. "He'll just say, 'We thought it was going to work, but it didn't.' Then he comes to me again and again and says, 'I want to try this over the summer.' I'll say, 'Go ahead.' "

Some students return to work for the program after college and graduate school. Darrius Moore, a 25-year-old Legal Outreach alum, took a job as an academic adviser with the program after graduating from Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pa. Though his degree is in social work, Mr. Moore said his summer internship at a prominent Manhattan law firm paid dividends in college.

"It gives you the opportunity to see what corporate America is like, how a law firm operates, which is a profession that is foreign to most of us," he says. "It encourages you to think, 'I can exist in this world.' So when you get to college, you say to yourself, 'OK, I have interacted with this demographic of people before. I can compete.' "

Sixty-eight percent of Legal Outreach graduates between 2008 and 2015 finished college with GPAs of 3.0 or higher, according to a recent report, with 21 percent at or above 3.5.

And many do pursue legal careers: 10 percent of participants who graduated college are pursuing or have obtained a law degree.

“A lot of organizations out there are helping kids get *to* college, but when you look at the percentages of those who get *through* college, it’s abysmal,” says O’Neal. “You have to ask yourself ‘Why?’ Part of that has to do with finances; I certainly understand that. But it also has to do with people not being prepared for it.”

O’Neal has been pressured by funders and other educators to expand, but he says he’s wary of sacrificing quality for size — especially given how unreliable funding can be. The program gets about 60 percent of its money from foundations and the rest from individuals.

But O’Neal did help a group in New Jersey start the NJ Legal Education Empowerment Program, a nonprofit affiliated with Seton Hall Law School that uses Legal Outreach’s model. It celebrated its 10th anniversary this year and has graduated more than 140 students to date.

College is like ‘another country’

Of all Legal Outreach’s offerings, Cooper believes the transition-to-college workshop deserves most credit for helping students finish college. It covers academic as well as social issues — the meaning of consent, how to respond to racial micro-aggressions, proper ways of interacting with professors, handling roommate conflicts, and what to do if financial aid falls through. Cooper peruses *The Chronicle of Higher Education* for real-life case studies to present to students.

“For our kids, going to college is as different as going to another country,” she says.

“Knowing what’s coming and having tools to deal with it allows them to navigate in this new world.”

Ismelda said she’s grateful that Legal Outreach has pushed her to excel. “The kids I go to school with don’t necessarily try, aren’t the most motivated kids,” she says. Three years at Legal Outreach has changed her outlook, she adds.

“If not for Legal Outreach, I wouldn’t have had any idea of what my options are,” she said. “I would have taken that list my school gave us and told my mom, ‘Hey, I don’t have to go to

college. I can just work.’ ”

This story was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education.

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