

Go Back To Junior High

By Lawrence Savell

We've all heard the pro athlete or entertainment celebrity explain his or her charitable efforts and/or donations as reflecting a desire to "give something back" to the community. Such a sense of responsibility should be shared by all lawyers and be at the heart of fulfilling their professional obligation to do pro bono work.

But taking the time to give something to the community can also make you feel good.

Looking back on my 20-plus years of practice, few experiences have been as personally fulfilling — and simply fun — as the opportunity I have been given to participate over the past five years in the City Bar Fund's Junior High School Law-Related Education Project, a pro bono program designed to improve understanding of the law, the legal system, and the legal profession.

The Project, which resulted six years ago from a suggestion by Chief Judge Judith Kaye, is a partnership between Legal Outreach, Inc., the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, the Department of Education, and the Justice Resource Center. A couple of times a year, it matches volunteer lawyers and judges with seventh- and eighth-grade classes throughout the New York City public school system for "Guest Speaker Weeks." The volunteers visit classrooms of teachers who are participating in the Middle School Law-Related Education Training Institute; seventh-grade teachers utilize a "Law, the Legal System and Dispute Resolution Curriculum" and eighth-grade teachers address "Law and Social Problems." After coordination with the teacher, the lawyer and judge volunteers each spend a period with one or more classes, speaking to and engaging in a dialogue with the students about these and similar topics. During the latest year for which statistics are available, over 2,000 students from 23 districts and 34 schools participated in the curriculum, and the vast majority met with the volunteer speakers.

It is an eye-opening process — on both sides.

The greatest revelation for me was the level of understanding and insight demonstrated by the 12 to 14-year-olds I encountered. As much of my practice is products liability defense, I have the classes review and participate in role play of my "Yummy Chocolate Milk Case." It involves a boy, Buddy, whose softball batting average takes a nosedive after he begins drinking Yummy Chocolate Milk, and who then sues the manufacturer. Among the questions I put to the students are what arguments can be made by Yummy in its defense, what questions might Yummy's counsel ask of Buddy, and what other information might Yummy's counsel need. In every class, students nail many of the key issues. Although they may not know terms like product identification and alternative causation, they will propose questions

that seek that very information, such as "Are you sure Buddy drank Yummy Chocolate Milk as opposed to another brand?", "What else did he drink?", "Is he just fatter than he was before?", and "Did a new pitcher just show up?"

These students represent an audience very different from the juries, clients, and colleagues with whom we normally speak on legal subjects. I always have to keep in mind their frame of reference (and age): I have had to delete from my recitation of famous people with law degrees legendary sports commentator Howard Cosell, because of the blank stares I received upon mentioning his name. But the key is to not in any way talk down to the students, but to engage and challenge them. I raise things like traffic lights and basketball fouls to draw them out on why we have rules and why they need to be enforced. Integral in all of this is the importance of the police, how they make us and our families more secure, and why they must be respected and obeyed. And I have found that the students are well versed in current events and other realities: the two questions I have been asked in virtually every class are "Do you know Johnnie Cochran?" and "How much money do you make?"



Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye and Association President E. Leo Milonas join students participating in the City Bar Fund's Junior High School Law-Related Education Project.

As I do within my firm, which has been strongly supportive of my and others' involvement in this and other pro

bono efforts, I would encourage all my fellow members of the Bar to consider taking part in this wonderful program. The time commitment is minimal, and the rewards are great. You can help put a face on the practice of law, and maybe change the perceptions of students while they are at a still quite impressionable age. I usually ask early in each session which of them think they might want to be a lawyer when they grow up, and usually get one or two hands in a class. When I ask again at the end, it's usually four or five.

And you might learn something about yourself as well. Just after we got married and before we had begun repopulating the universe, my wife accompanied me to one of my first classes, sitting in the back row. During the course of the session, I saw this normally quite composed managing director at a major investment banking firm wiping her eyes. Among the questions the students asked me at the end was, "Who is that lady crying back there?" After the class left, I asked her what was the matter. "I guess you really could be a daddy," she sniffed happily.

Lawrence Savell is counsel at Chadbourne & Parke LLP. This article expands upon his remarks to new and returning participants in the Project at a January 21 meeting at the Association. Those interested in becoming volunteers may contact Sara Chang at the Fund by e-mail (schang@abcny.org), fax (212-221-5318) or regular mail (City Bar Fund, ABCNY, 42 West 44th Street, New York, NY 10036).