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LAW STUDENTS NETWORK, GET TIPS AT PICNIC



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MIAMI-DADE — Away from the conservative cherry wood panels and stuffy boardrooms of law firms, an estimated 3,000 black and Latino law school students, top attorneys and judges shed their leather briefcases and pinstripe suits for an outing at a minority mentoring picnic held at Amelia Earhart Park in Hialeah on Saturday, a common practice of helping South Florida's aspiring lawyers.

The free picnic, now in its 10th year, provided a festive and relaxed atmosphere, with law firms and legal organizations providing literature and information under white tents. Other booths provided prizes and foods from barbecued ribs to Chinese rice. There was also wine tasting, along with music and carnival rides for kids.

Wine connoisseurs Charlene Hunter-Gault, a renowned journalist now living in South Africa, and her husband gave out samples of their South African wines and offered tips and advice on storing and serving the drinks.

The picnic also included law school deans, professors and community leaders who offered alternative employment other than law firms for students. Agencies such as the Legal Services of Greater Miami provided information on jobs helping the poor.

Organizers said the event was a continued effort to motivate and encourage minority students to enter into mentoring relationships at a time when large-scale layoffs are occurring as many law firms close offices in South Florida's tough economy. Law students and graduates from local and state universities use the event to forge new mentoring relationships with professionals and one another.

Students attending the picnic wear red name tags to catch the attention of available professionals. Surveys of the mentoring relationships are offered so organizers can track the program's success.

"It's important that students not be shy," said Eugene Pettis, the first African-American president of the Florida Bar. "You have to make the calls. You have to follow up."

Thilluame Burke, 30, a single father and first-year law student at Florida International University, attended an interview seminar at the picnic on how to dress for success. Burke said his mentor at the law firm Peckar & Abramson urged him to attend the picnic.

"It's a great way to network and meet people from the same walk of life," Burke said.

Organizers said students bond with their mentors to help weather the stress and difficulties of law school and while trying to open doors for employment.

"It's a support system," said the John Koyzak, an attorney who's popular with minority students because of his active involvement in the program. "Mentoring can help open the doors for these students. It helps them get the interviews."

The event is sponsored by the prestigious law firm Greenberg Traurig, which has 1,800 lawyers worldwide and an office in Miami. Other top law firms such as Holland & Knight also are involved in the mentor program, where lawyers advise students on everything from cases to office protocol and etiquette.

Erica Clark, a senior law school student, joined 49 fellow students at Florida Coastal Law School in Jacksonville, driving 325 miles to attend the picnic. She said the networking opportunities and contacts were too good to pass up.

"It's very motivating," said Clark, who is majoring in employment law. "You feel more relaxed and nobody's nervous."

"The biggest fear minority students have about law school is money," said Jaret Davis, a managing partner at Greenberg Traurig and president of the Law Alumni Association of the University of Miami, where tuition for law school costs an average \$50,000 annually. "Mentoring is all about self-empowerment and discovery. There are many resources out there that many minorities do not know about."

Marlon Hill, a popular entertainment lawyer with the law firm, delancyhill, led a dance session in his Florida State football jersey. Hill cautioned students to be selective in choosing their mentors.

"Don't just take anyone," said Hill, who mentors about three minority attorneys a year. "Students should get to know them and see if their interest and needs fit."

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