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Minority Mentoring Picnic matches lawyers, students

The students left with the names and numbers of lawyers they can call for guidance

By Jan Pudlow

Senior Editor

Students from every law school in Florida gathered at the Amelia Earhart Park in Hialeah October 21 for the promise of meeting some of the best lawyers, judges, and bar leaders in the state.

After a sunny day packed with volleyball, delicious food, and good conversations, the students left with the names of lawyers willing to be their mentors, as well as leads on job opportunities.

"This year's picnic grew by probably 50 percent in numbers and enthusiasm," said Miami lawyer John Kozyak, creator of the Minority Mentoring Picnic, who estimated the turnout of this third annual event at more than 1,200.

Law students wore red stickers that asked: "Need a mentee?"

Lawyers and judges wore red stickers that asked: "Need a mentor?"

While feasting on roasted pig, goat, ribs, and jerk chicken, they found each other, struck up conversations, and made contacts that can make real differences in students' success in law school and their first legal jobs.

Detra Shaw-Wilder, Kozyak's partner who worked hard to help organize the picnic, said a highlight for her was watching Paul Huck, a federal judge of the Southern District of Florida, in action. Judge Huck enthusiastically made sure each of the University of Florida students, who had traveled down from Gainesville by bus, had met many judges and lawyers. The scene brought back memories of when Huck had mentored Shaw-Wilder as a new lawyer, and she had tried her first case with him. Huck had hired Kozyak many years earlier, and so the circle of mentoring new lawyers keeps on rolling.

"To me, Judge Huck's excitement at the picnic was what it's all about," Shaw-Wilder said.

What has now become a Minority Mentoring Picnic tradition, before the sun was up, Miami lawyer **Ramon Abadin**, past president of the Cuban American Bar Association, was beginning the six-hour process to roast

a pig.

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And Dade County Judge Fred Seraphin, Florida's only Haitian-American judge, refined his skills at flipping burgers and chatting up students at the same time.

Eleventh Circuit Chief Judge Joe Farina came early to make sure he visited students from each law school.

Akerman Senterfitt was one of several law firms setting up a recruitment tent, where Joseph Hatchett, former Florida Supreme Court justice and 11th Circuit Court of Appeals judge, held court charming law students.

Carlos Martinez, chief assistant public defender of the 11th Circuit, also set up a recruitment table and signed up four students for summer internships.

"The turnout was amazing," said Martinez, who is mentoring four students through CABA. "It was an absolutely great place to be. The food was great and the company was even better."

Among the legal luminaries enjoying the day were Florida Supreme Court Justice Peggy Quince, who said she wishes she had had a mentor going through law school, Florida Bar President-elect Frank Angones, along with many members of the Bar Board of Governors, and Cesar Alvarez, the lawyer at the top of the Greenberg Traurig firm.

A bevy of state court judges challenged lawyers in volleyball and were declared the winners of the tournament that was described as "competitive, fun, and spirited."

But the day's real winners were law students who left with the names and numbers of lawyers they can call for guidance and inspiration.

To keep the spirit of mentoring going year-round, Shaw-Wilder said, Kozyak has started a mentoring foundation to continue mentoring connections, fund the picnic, and give small scholarships to deserving law students.

(For more information, contact the JWK Mentoring Foundation at 2525 Ponce de Leon Blvd., Miami 33134.)

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