



Lessons in Groundbreaking Achievement

How a State Bar initiative is sharing the importance of firsts with Texas schoolchildren.

BY HANNAH KIDDOO

PEOPLE REACH “FIRST” MILESTONES EVERY YEAR. All firsts are unique, each first is important, and the next first could be you.

This is the message State Bar of Texas President Lisa M. Tatum wants to share with students across the state. And it is why she launched *I was the first. Vote for Me!*, an educational program tailored to elementary schoolchildren. The project introduces students to select individuals

from U.S. and Texas history who were the first to accomplish a certain achievement—and Tatum hopes it will inspire the students to become firsts as well. “There’s a lot of life and light that comes from young people,” said Tatum. “You can reach, teach, and expand the mind of a young person.”

The project was particularly important for Tatum, who, in 2013, became the first African-American to lead

the State Bar of Texas. In recognition of that election, she hoped to share information about the leaders who paved the way for her. “I wanted to do something that would have some relevance as a first and would translate and not just focus on the fact that I’m African-American, but that being the first is an accomplishment that is achievable for anybody who sets their mind to it,” said Tatum.

Elementary students are required to understand and explain the significance of numerous firsts in U.S. and Texas history as part of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills standards. Carefully crafted by the Law-Related Education Department of the State Bar of Texas, *I was the first. Vote for Me!* was developed to help students learn about these important figures in an interactive and engaging environment. The project also touches on lessons in reading, math, citizenship, and voting.

I was the first. Vote for Me! includes a collection of animated video clips with a cast of characters, such as Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean; César Chávez, the first person to organize a successful farm workers union; Ruby Bridges, one of the first African-American children to attend an all-white elementary school in the southern United States; and Sam Houston, the first president of the Republic of Texas. An animated depiction of Tatum introduces the project by explaining the importance of firsts, and then each historic character shares his or her most significant achievements. After learning about the firsts, students vote on their favorite. The winner has a fictional school named in his or her honor.

Jan Miller, director of the Law-Related Education Department, says the response from participants—including teachers, students, and community leaders who present the project—has been positive. “Although the videos are only 30 seconds,” said Miller, “they are full of pertinent information. It’s a win-win for everybody.”

I was the first. Vote for Me! launched in August 2013 and was quickly implemented in Texas schools. In Williamson County, attorneys Lisa Richardson, Wendi Lester-Boyd, and Stacy Matthews teamed up with Mya Mercer, principal of Old Town Elementary in Round Rock, to bring the program to more than 400 first through fifth grade students. “It was fun to have these fifth graders start talking about all of these people,” said Richardson. “It seemed to start making sense as to who some of these people were.”

While Richardson’s group centered the lesson on Celebrate Freedom Week and Constitution Day materials, *I was the first. Vote for Me!* can be used throughout the year or tailored to fit other special occasions including Presidents Day, Black History Month, Women’s History Month, and Law Day.

On Nov. 5, 2013—Election Day—elementary students in the Tyler Independent School District were casting their own votes in the classroom. The classes studied a selection of candidates from the *I was the first. Vote for Me!* Veteran’s Day curriculum and chose a common favorite—the

Code Talkers—as the winner. “There was a great response from the children,” said Alesha Williams, vice president of the Smith County Young Lawyers Association. “They really enjoyed watching the videos and would excitedly share what they learned about the characters.”

Williams, who plans on leading additional class discussions with materials from *I was the first. Vote for Me!*, feels the lessons incorporated in the project are important for the targeted age group. “It gives them a better appreciation of our society,” said Williams. “Elementary students are at the perfect age to discover that throughout their lives there are, and will be, countless individuals who opened, or will open, the doors for them to have the opportunities that they have.”

I was the first. Vote for Me! is just one of many projects offered through the Law-Related Education Department, which focuses on providing a wide range of services to help educators and attorneys teach students about the law. The department worked with Texas teachers, Law Focused Education Inc., and Raining Popcorn Media to create the project, ensuring that the dynamic materials matched TEKS requirements.

To date, *I was the first. Vote for Me!* has reached more than 196,000 students, and there is great potential for expansion. Because the project was created with the ability to work for audiences outside of Texas, it could easily be incorporated into educational plans across the United States. Presentations at national-level conferences are helping to spread the word, while web resources are being shared through social networks, such as Pinterest.

Tatum hopes that having students hear positive messages on firsts and the voting process will get them chatting about it independently—both in the classroom and at home. “If the child’s talking about it, that’s one way we are indirectly influenced as adults,” said Tatum. “It rubs off.”

At the end of a session, students receive a booklet and an ‘I Voted!’ sticker, signifying that they took part in the voting decision and providing an opportunity for the conversation to continue after the presentation. “They’ve seen some adult with that on before,” Miller of LRE said of the stickers. “If that even allows them to ask questions about voting and participating, that’s a win.”

Texas attorneys are encouraged to share the project with schools in their communities. A kit for *I was the first. Vote for Me!*, complete with step-by-step handouts and a guide to themed lessons, was designed to make the process easy. Attorneys interested in participating are encouraged to go to texasbar.com/iwasthefirst for more information.

Tatum is looking forward to the project’s continued growth. “When we talk about a legacy and leaving something behind, you hope that that becomes part of a pathway for things that are to come,” said Tatum. “I have seen parents, teachers, and children light up with this program for different reasons, and I wouldn’t change that for the world.” **TBJ**