



## *How the Texas Young Lawyers Association is getting the word out to students.*

BY ANNE DINGUS

**ENERGY COMES IN MANY FORMS.** Just as Texas will always need oil, it will always need lawyers. So just as the Texas Bar formed the Texas Young Lawyers Association in 1930 to encourage fledgling attorneys, now TYLA itself is taking steps to reach out a collective hand and foster a flow of fresh, wannabe practitioners of the law. “We need a pipeline,” said TYLA president C.E. Rhodes of Houston, “a pipeline of hardworking, dedicated law students. That’s why we came up with the *What Do Lawyers Do?* program.”

This pipeline program is one that the energetic Rhodes set about implementing after he took office as the president of TYLA last summer. It’s not just a here-you-go folder of brochures and forms, although handouts bolster the discussion; it’s a face-to-face program in which TYLA members travel thousands of miles throughout Texas, talking directly to students at both high schools and universities about the road to a law degree. “We talk about life before law school, life during law school, and life after

law school,” Rhodes said. “They ask and we answer. We believe that *What Do Lawyers Do?* will help create wiser and more culturally diverse generations of future lawyers.”

Rhodes said his passion for “the pipeline” springs largely from personal experience. “I knew when I was in high school that I wanted to be a lawyer, but I didn’t know anything about the process of trying to become one. Didn’t have a clue,” he explained. “I was on my own, and it was hard at times. All I knew was that college plus law school

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equaled seven years.” The prospect seemed daunting: “I felt lost because I didn’t have anyone to say to me, ‘LSAT’s what it’s all about. Take the LSAT review course. That’s step number one.’ That’s why I started thinking about the pipeline and about the *What Do Lawyers Do?* project. Students need to be educated to learn what to do to get into law school. We want to help them learn to learn,” he said. For many young people, the mere idea of law school seems intimidating and remote. “A lot of kids grow up around lawyers—their parents, their neighbors. But a lot of young people from, say, inner-city Houston or an East Texas farm may never have met a single lawyer. To them, a lawyer is merely a character they see on a billboard or a TV show.”

Last fall, Team TYLA hit the road to take its message to high schools and universities all over Texas. Many of the organization’s members signed on, including directors Sam Houston and Priscilla Camacho, who both live in San Antonio. Enlisting local attorneys and helpful academics for the cause, the group has so far hosted the *What Do Lawyers Do?* panels in Austin, Waco, Corpus Christi, Laredo, El Paso, and Edinburg. It has emphasized visits to towns in the Rio Grande Valley because the region currently produces only a small percentage of law school applicants. There are obvious reasons for that circumstance: poverty is a significant factor, as is distance. “In the Valley, there’s an especially strong sense of family,” Rhodes noted. “That’s obviously a positive thing, but it can sometimes weigh on kids. Even if they are especially driven, they find it hard to break out of the pattern and leave home. We hope to encourage these kids by telling them, ‘Is it hard? Yes! Does it require sacrifice? Yes! But you can do it.’” Camacho can relate. A native of Laredo, she was accepted at several law schools but chose to attend Texas Tech, more than 500 miles away. “It was so hard for me,” she said. “I was physically and emotionally separated from my family, to whom I have very strong ties. I couldn’t get home easily to visit them. But I got through it, and I want students to know that they can too.”

The *What Do Lawyers Do?* presentations so far have proved popular and successful. At Texas A&M International University in Laredo, almost 100 students showed up. Kimber Palmer, an instructor and prelaw adviser at TAMIU, said, “This program was a generous gesture to future lawyers, and it did the students a lot of good. They all had a positive response. I think they were left with the realization that ‘I’m from TAMIU and I can go to law school if I put my mind to it.’” At the University of Texas–Pan American in Edinburg, Jerry Polinard, who has taught political science there for 40 years, also praised the *What Do Lawyers Do?* project: “We’re in Hidalgo County. It’s one of the poorest counties in the nation. Our students

here really need role models, so the physical presence of the lawyers was especially helpful.” (To further encourage prelaw students, Polinard has posted, in a display case near his office, dozens of acceptance letters received by former students who went on to become lawyers.) A third school that welcomed the program was United High School in Laredo, which has more than 3,800 students, including freshmen, who warranted their own panel.

“We get all kinds of questions,” Rhodes observed. “‘Do I need to go to a certain law school?’ ‘Can I be a mother and a lawyer at the same time?’ ‘What is a mock trial?’ ‘What is the Socratic method?’” Certain themes emerged from TYLA’s first few rollouts of the *What Do Lawyers Do?* panel presentations. One theme was a general (arguably worldwide) stereotype of lawyers as litigators only; few kids are aware of the breadth and diversity of areas of legal practice. The TYLA panelists like to ask their listeners, “What are you good at? What do you like to do?” Priscilla Camacho noted that most people think of *Law and Order* when they visualize attorneys: “In other words, they’re litigators. But if you’re petrified by the idea of going into a courtroom, there are so many other options. You can consider family law or business law or tax law or patent law. And your academic background is a factor. If you have experience in accounting, you could become a forensic accountant. You don’t even have to work for a law firm.” (This final fact about being an attorney is one that Camacho herself embodies: after having her own practice and working for two law firms, she has signed on as vice president of education and workforce development at the Greater San Antonio Chamber of Commerce.) One student at UT Pan Am, Anna Mariah Garcia—who attended the TYLA presentation there—has already settled on intellectual property law. She was encouraged by the panel’s remarks. “They explained how to take the road to law school and how to live a balanced life while doing it,” she said. “You could sum up the message as ‘Follow your dreams.’”

The TYLA panelists also stress the importance of the LSAT and of taking a review course as preparation for the test. They highlight the necessity of the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) and offer insider tips—specific and detailed—about financial aid and scholarships. For example, Camacho pointed out that students who qualify for a district’s free or reduced-cost lunch program often are entitled to waived application fees for law schools, and some nonprofits, after hiring a brand-new lawyer, subsidize the repayment of academic loans. Students are often alarmed at the amount of debt they might face, and the panelists reassure them that they will repay that money sooner than they realize. “We explain what to do about financial aid,” said Houston, “including what *not* to do—like blindly signing promissory notes. We hope to help these students become better consumers of higher

education.” But the panelists also discuss realistic salary expectations. “Most people estimate the median salary of a lawyer as \$250,000 a year,” said Rhodes. “The truth is, most lawyers in Texas make less than \$100,000.”

However, many of the prospective lawyers who attend the *What Do Lawyers Do?* presentations are not thinking about going into law to get rich. They want to better not only themselves but also their families and friends, and that gives them something else in common with Rhodes. “C.E.’s whole deal is that people shouldn’t go to law school just to end up making money,” explained Houston. “He strongly believes that our profession should help people.” And Rhodes, having struggled to understand and undertake the work of law, acknowledges, “I didn’t want other potential lawyers, especially those from a small town and a certain socioeconomic background, to be in that same situation.”

Fortunately, this attitude is prevalent among future attorneys in the Valley, where the population has long been around 90 percent Hispanic. TAMIU’s Kimber Palmer said, “During our panel, we had a lot of questions about immigration issues. They’re so important to these young people, most of whom are first-generation college

students. They have witnessed their family being mistreated or even taken away because of their immigration status, and they’re mad and they want to do something about it. They want to protect their people from being taken advantage of because of their poverty and their lack of knowledge of American law and culture.” Members of the TYLA board who are Hispanic, including Priscilla Camacho and Victor Villarreal, make sure to mention the bonus of being bilingual. “Victor likes to point out the extra ability we have to assist our family members who speak only Spanish,” Camacho said. “A second language is not necessarily going to be asked about on a law school application, but the after-the-fact benefits are immense.”

Summing up his pipeline program, Rhodes opined, “The particular education you get in law school is a passport to travel—not just around the world but through all of life. Law school is never a bad idea.” **TBJ**

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