



## UMaine Law School Seeks to Close 'Diversity Gap'

By Patty Wight | December 8, 2014

The overwhelming majority of attorneys in the U.S. are white - 88 percent, according to 2010 Census Bureau statistics. The numbers in Maine are even more extreme. And advocates of diversity say this can pose barriers to justice.

In an attempt to address the issue, the University of Maine School of Law has joined with a local lawyer to reach out to a diverse class of high school juniors in Portland and teach them about the legal profession.

Willette Elder doesn't know why there's such a diversity gap in the legal profession, but she knows it's a problem, "because the law is one of the few areas that touches everyone in our country. And to have a legal system that touches everyone, that touches diverse populations, but not composed of diverse populations, is an imbalance."

Elder is a business law associate at the firm Bernstein Shur in Portland. And she says she's the only black female attorney working in a Maine law firm. The problem, Elder says, is that when the legal profession doesn't reflect the general population, it can restrict who has access to justice.

"For example, certain cultural issues where people have problems opening up and speaking about things that might help them with a better defense, better strategy," she says. "So I think diversity is about a sensitivity to those types of things."

Elder has taken steps to improve the situation, by coordinating a local version of a national Legal Diversity Pipeline Program. Her law firm partnered with the University of Maine School of Law to visit juniors at Casco Bay High School in Portland, which has a relatively diverse student body, and teach them about the legal profession.

Student Nate Hesselink admits that, initially, he wasn't all that interested to learn about law. "I was picturing a very boring kind of classic law classroom you see in movies or TV shows, where all the students are falling asleep and the teacher's up there just talking," he says.

But Hesselink says that changed when students got to act out specific court cases. They learned about contract law, freedom of speech, and search and seizure. And, says Lona Peter, a student of color, the new knowledge struck a personal chord.

"It just helps you live better and not be scared of the police and scared of other people," Peter says, "because you know you have your rights and you can say certain things that don't go against it."

Peter says she now sees becoming an attorney as a way to have an impact on issues that affect her and her community. The dean of the University of Maine School of Law, Peter Pitegoff, says he believes the program has promise.

"I hope students walk away with an excitement of how law can be an important tool in social justice, how society works, and understanding how things fit together," Pitegoff says.

Peter Pitegoff says many potential students may wrongly assume that specific training is needed to even qualify for law school, when, in fact, an undergraduate degree - whether it be in poetry or business - is enough. What does matter, he says, is whether a student is engaged and performs well.

Attorney Willette Elder agrees that some of the barriers to entering the legal profession are perceived. "The barriers that you may see - or may think that you see - are not necessarily there. So here I am as an example of what has happened, and what can happen."

Elder admits that being a minority in her profession can be challenging. But she says she loves her job, and wants others to know the opportunities that exist.