

Portland Press Herald

'Street Law' students consider legal careers

A program aims to show a diverse group of kids that they can have careers in the profession.

By David Hench | December 8, 2014

Lona Peter isn't comfortable speaking in front of crowds and she doesn't fancy herself a skilled debater. So based on what she's seen on legal shows on television, she figured the law was an unlikely career path.

But that's changed over the past month, as students in her social studies class were exposed to real lawyers who discussed real cases and helped the students put themselves into those roles.

Now Peter, a junior at Casco Bay High School in Portland, is more open-minded about the law, believing her passion for events in the news could drive her to a legal career.

"It's possible for anybody actually to be a lawyer," she said Monday, as about 80 students from the school met at the University of Maine School of Law for a daylong series of activities called the Legal Diversity Pipeline Conference, designed to expose students from a broad cross-section of society to the legal profession.

The program is called Street Law and is co-sponsored by the Portland law firm Bernstein Shur and the law school.

"There is an absence of diversity in the law. The statistics are startling, which is problematic because law is one of the areas that touches everyone," said Willette Elder, a business law attorney with Bernstein Shur and the program's coordinator.

Elder grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, and while she didn't experience a program like Street Law, she had successful mentors who instilled in her an aspiration to be successful. She went on to study at Howard University and got her law degree from George Washington University.

"Hopefully students will raise their aspirations: 'I met a lawyer and she looks just like me,' " Elder said.

Portland's public school system is the largest and most ethnically diverse in the state. Casco Bay High School employs expeditionary learning, in which students engage in long-term studies on a single topic.

The Street Law program, in its third year in Portland, exposes students to a wide variety of legal careers and helps debunk myths, like the one posed by a student, that being a good lawyer meant you had to be a good liar, Elder said, laughing.

Monday's event included presentations by attorneys with Bernstein Shur and students at the law school.

The event also included workshops in which students argued opposing sides of key constitutional questions, such as the separation of church and state and the right to be free of unreasonable search and seizure - issues the students have been studying for the past month.

The experience is empowering, said student Cassandra Bull.

"Sometimes we get so passionate about what's going on in the news. ... We say, 'That could be a good solution, why don't they think of that?' " she said. Practicing law can be a way to make change happen, she said.

Even students who don't see themselves in a legal career said the exercise has been eye-opening about the broad impact the law has on everyday life.

"It's definitely showed me the cool aspect of lawyering," said junior Nathan Hesselink.