

## 'I thought they were scary people': Portland program aims to increase youth interest, diversity in legal professions

By Seth Koenig | December 8, 2014

Casco Bay High School juniors Cassandra Bull and Lona Peter said they had always considered police and lawyers — the principal players in the criminal justice system — to be “terrifying” adversaries.

“I thought they were scary people,” Bull said.

“Just the idea of cops is frightening,” added Peter.

A series of deadly altercations between police and unarmed black men nationwide has spurred protests — including [demonstrations over the weekend](#) in Portland — and increased attention to the lack of minority representation in courts and police forces.

In Maine, Willette Elder is among those working to change that disparity, at least in the courts. But she’s got a long way to go. Elder is currently the only black woman working as an attorney for a Maine law firm.

Elder is this year’s organizer for the Street Law program, an outreach effort rolled out locally by her law firm, Bernstein Shur, along with the University of Maine School of Law, Casco Bay High School and the National Association for Law Placement.

“I didn’t grow up with lawyers in my family, either,” Elder said. “I didn’t grow up always getting the message I could be a lawyer. But here I am and here’s what I do. [I can tell students], ‘I was in a seat just like yours.’ I’m here to be a mentor if you need a mentor. I think it sends a great message.”

Approximately 80 Casco Bay High School students took classes on legal topics over the past month and a half, leading into Monday’s series of workshops and presentations at the Maine Law facility in Portland.

“It’s an important element of the School of Law’s commitment to diversity, our commitment to reaching out to multicultural communities,” said Peter Pitegoff, dean at the University of Maine School of Law, just before noon Monday. “There is so much energy in the air.”



Willette Elder

Photo credit Troy R. Bennett | BDN

The program took place against a national news backdrop of recent grand jury refusals to indict white police officers in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City for incidents that left unarmed black men dead.



Casco Bay HS Students, Nathan Hesselink,  
Cassandra Bull, Lona Peter  
Photo credit Troy R. Bennett | BSN

The incidents have put the spotlight on race relations in America, in particular how statistically underrepresented blacks and other minorities are in the court system and police forces around the country.

“Statistics are what they are right now,” Elder said. “Diversity in the law is very important. The law is one of the few things that in our country touches everyone’s life. If there isn’t diversity in the law, there will be some circumstances where certain interests aren’t represented. So it’s

important to be able to have diversity in the law, to kind of change the American narrative of what it means to be a lawyer, what it means to be well represented.”

At least some of the students on hand Monday said their perspectives on the profession have changed.

Junior Nathan Hesselink said the program has shown the students there are multiple ways to practice law outside of just the criminal cases many of them are familiar with from television — that there are jobs in contract negotiations, intellectual property law and other legal specialties.

For classmates Peter and Bull, once “scary” lawyers are now potential career mentors, they said. Each said she learned the value of understanding her legal rights and the process by which attorneys piece together their cases.

Each also said she’s now considering pursuit of a legal career.

“I think I could get the hang of it,” Bull said. “I could do it.”