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Kozyak Minority Mentoring Foundation Has Helped Facilitate More Than 2,000 Mentorships Over The Years

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Jim Ash

A summer internship at the public defender's office in Augusta, Georgia, convinced University of Florida third-year law student Kebin Lopez-Bautista that his future lies in criminal defense work.

"It was incredibly hands-on," Lopez-Bautista said. "I loved the people in the office that I worked with, and I loved the clients that I worked with."

A native Honduran and the first in his family to attend college, Lopez-Bautista is one of eight Kozyak Minority Mentoring Foundation Summer Fellows who received $5,000 to support their volunteer work in a judicial office, legal clinic, or other not-for-profit.

As the only Spanish-speaker in the public defender's office, Bautista spent much of the internship on the front lines, especially on the days the office reserved for clients who don't speak English.

"I did some bond hearings, I went to the jail to speak to clients, I spoke with clients on the phone, I sat in while the attorney conducted client interviews," he said. "I conducted a pretrial motion that actually went favorably for clients. It was such a rewarding experience."

In the past 15 years, KMMF has linked 2,000 students with judges and attorneys willing to help them navigate through law school and avoid common pitfalls.

A not-for-profit with a 17-member board, KMMF works with The Florida Bar and

voluntary bar associations and has a close relationship with the Cuban American Bar Association, the Florida Association for Women Lawyers, the Gay and Lesbian Lawyers Association, the Haitian Lawyers Association, and the Florida Muslim Bar Association.

KMMF was co-founded by Coral Gables attorney John Kozyak, a 2015 Tobias Simon Pro Bono Award winner who never misses an opportunity to tout the benefits of mentoring.

A guiding hand can spell the difference between failure and success for a young student, and the only thing a mentor has to pay is attention, Kozyak says.

“This does not take a tremendous amount of time, maybe a half hour a week,” he said. “If it clicks, and you put in more time, it’s probably because you want to.”

Mentors are not expected to find mentees a job, and it’s perfectly acceptable to switch mentees if the relationship doesn’t gel, Kozyak says.

Kozyak traces his passion for mentoring to his childhood in the 1960s in what he calls a “meanly” segregated town outside of St. Louis, where none of his 1,000 high school classmates was black.

“My mother was quite a civil rights activist who strongly felt that all prejudice and all discrimination was wrong,” Kozyak said. “She would sit on the ‘wrong’ side of lunch counters in St. Louis to make a point.”

When he first came to Florida in the 1970s and joined a large firm, Kozyak says its only black lawyer had just left. Some male lawyers would eat lunch at a club that excluded women, he said.

“I was immediately put on the recruiting committee because the Miami office was growing quickly,” he said. “I helped hire now-Senior U.S. District Judge Christine Arguello (of Colorado) in 1979 or 1980, when she was the first Latina to graduate from Harvard.”

Kozyak is a founding partner of Kozyak, Tropin & Throckmorton, a firm with diversity woven into its DNA.

The firm has been home to four former CABA presidents, a former president of the Gwen S. Cherry Black Women Lawyers Association, a former president and past director of local chapters of FAWL, and a former president of the Asian Pacific American Bar Association.

Kozyak co-founded KMMF with law partner Detra Shaw-Wilder, who Kozyak recruited as the firm's first black attorney nearly 26 years ago through ties to a University of Miami School of Law minority mentoring program.

A recent chair of the Business Law Section's Business Litigation Committee, Shaw-Wilder was instrumental in setting up the foundation and recruiting its board members.

For 13 years, KMMF sponsored an annual minority mentoring picnic that in 2016 drew 5,000 people to Amelia Earhart Park in Hialeah. But KMMF now "concentrates on smaller receptions and meetings to provide more direct input," according to its website.

"We like to think that we're making a great impact across the Bar even without the great food," Shaw-Wilder said.

KMMF's next event, scheduled for October, is an annual welcome reception for black law students that usually draws a few hundred people.

These days, the legal profession is much more aware of the importance of diversity, and KMMF's efforts have made a big difference, Shaw-Wilder said.

"Absolutely, I've noticed progress, the discussion of diversity is something that's included at all levels of the Bar," she said.

KMMF mentoring initiatives have proven that there is an abundance of minority talent to recruit and promote, Shaw-Wilder said.

"I'm very proud of that," she said. "Of course, I can't say all of that without saying there's still a lot more to be done."

That's one reason that KMMF board member James Moon, who chairs the Business Law Section's Bankruptcy/UCC Committee, recently spearheaded an LGTBQ

mentoring initiative.

LGTBQ law students and beginning lawyers face challenges that other lawyers may have difficulty understanding and the political atmosphere has grown less tolerant, Moon said.

Moon remembers scanning law firm websites for anti-discrimination declarations when he was considering coming to Florida.

“When I came down here from New York, it was important for me to work at an LGTBQ friendly firm, because I don’t want to have implicit bias interfering with my career path,” he said.

Moon turned down one job offer when he noticed the firm’s website lacked an anti-discrimination notice.

The managing partner called Moon to apologize and assure him he was more than welcome, Moon said.

“I really respected him for that,” Moon said. “It’s those little cues that an LGTBQ person looks at that a straight person never has to think about.”

Nova Southeastern third-year law student Lucia Rodriguez would have probably spent the summer teaching dance if she had not been awarded a KMMF Fellowship.

Instead, she got to work with federal prosecutors in the Southern District of Florida, where she had previously interned with U.S. District Judge Darrin P. Gayles.

When an injury ended her dreams of being a professional dancer, Rodriguez chose the law because she wanted to pursue something that could be more “sustaining” and intellectually challenging.

She spent the bulk of her internship performing legal research, including a response to a motion to exclude DNA evidence.

“The best part was, I turned in my draft to the AUSA and seeing that his final product contained some of my language and research,” she said. “It was like, wow.”

Rodriguez hasn’t decided on a specialty.

“I know I want to litigate,” she said. “Having experience with both procedure and evidence is getting the most out of your license.”

Rodriquez’s Honduran mother is a secretary, and her Argentine father works in construction. Neither attended college.

Mentors can make a big difference for first in family college students who have no one to guide them through the law school and loan application process, let alone the rigorous course work, Rodriguez said.

“My parents are the hardest working people I know, and they’ve always encouraged me, and it’s great,” she said. “But if there’s nobody to show you how, those are just words.”

It’s easy for minority law students to feel intimidated, Rodriguez said. She remembers walking into her first class and seeing only a few Latinos, and even fewer people of color, and feeling nervous.

But her confidence grew the more she studied.

“I applied my parent’s work ethic and went on to get the highest grade in eight classes,” she said. “What I found was knowledge of the law is a great equalizer. It doesn’t matter where you come from, or what you look like, if you’re willing to work twice as hard.”

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