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Summer camp cultivates interest in law

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In a program sponsored by the Just The Beginning Foundation, Chicago middle-school students learn about the law profession from Locke, Lord, Bissell & Liddell LLP partners A. Kelly Turner (from left), Ann Marie Walsh, Rowe W. Snider, Jon Biasetti and Mona M. Stone.

Eighth-grader Kateryna Dyakiv wanted to know what it means to be a partner in a law firm.

Her peer, Maria Cortes, asked: "Do you guys ever regret being a lawyer? And, do you guys ever get threats?"

And eighth-grader Peter Bied wanted to know how close the television series "Law & Order" comes to resembling real life as a lawyer.

Such went the line of questioning from Chicago-area seventh-, eighth- and ninth-graders who had gathered recently over boxed lunches in a conference room at the Loop office of Locke, Lord, Bissell & Liddell LLP, where a panel of partners shared some of their experiences of law firm life.

The field trip to the firm kicked off Just The Beginning Foundation's Middle School Law Camp, a week-long program designed to introduce youngsters of diverse backgrounds to the legal system and careers in the law that wrapped up Friday with campers delivering oral arguments with the help of the fictitious cases of *Hamburgers v. Hot Dogs*, *Nike v. Reebok*, *Bulls v. Pistons* and *Nirvana v. U2*.

The camp is sponsored by Just the Beginning Foundation, a nonprofit organization that aims to increase diversity in the federal courts and the legal profession as a whole.

The foundation has been offering similar free educational programs to high school students for the past four years. But last week marked the first time the program was rolled out to a younger audience of middle-school pupils, after an abbreviated pilot program was introduced to middle-school students earlier this year in Washington, D.C.

The aim, organizers said, is to introduce simple legal concepts and plant the seed that the legal profession is attainable.

"You want to start students on the right track from the very beginning," said 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge [Ann Claire Williams](#), a founder of Just the Beginning Foundation. "The point is to try to get people inspired and focused on their grades, and concentrated on a legal career at a younger age."

Along with the field trip to a big firm, the students visited the federal courthouse in Chicago, where they sat in on a jury trial before Chief U.S. District Judge [James F. Holderman](#) of the Northern District of Illinois, and on

the sentencing hearing of a man who was representing himself in the sentencing phase of his robbery case, said Samuel Finkelstein, the foundation's program director.

The campers received lessons in courts basics, like the difference between a criminal case and a civil case, at the camp's home base at DePaul University College of Law, and they participated in exercises such as mock mediations, Finkelstein said.

The program director said the camp also featured informal meetings with federal judges who talked about their paths to the legal profession and what they do as judges; with marshals from the U.S. Marshals Service, who offered demonstrations on how they transfer prisoners and on how a Taser works and why it is used; and with representatives of the Illinois Commission on Professionalism and from the Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission, who discussed how the profession is policed.

Many of the 65 or so middle-school students who participated in the camp this summer have no family member who attended college, let alone law school, said Paula Lucas, the foundation's executive director.

"Right now, even getting into high school is a competitive process," Lucas said. "Especially for students that come from diverse backgrounds, many of them don't have the opportunities. They kind of end up with a disadvantage."

In contrast, other students whose family includes a lawyer may have been "exposed to the language of the law, maybe to courtrooms, the career itself and what kind of skills they need to be focused on," Lucas said. "For us, our goal is to reach as far back as we can, so they're exposed early on and so they have the knowledge and experiences to be in the same competitive range as other students."

The students received lessons in formulating an oral argument, in preparation for their presentations on Friday with the use of the fictitious cases.

In *Hamburgers v. Hot Dogs*, for example: "The lawyer representing the side of hamburgers argued that hamburgers were better because the majority of their classmates agreed that hamburgers are better. The court found that this was persuasive evidence that hamburgers were, in fact, better," according to law camp materials.

"It's a fun exercise to help them learn how precedent is applied," Finkelstein said. "It's trying to put it at a level where they can still take something away from it. We didn't think they were quite ready for the actual case law with a legal argument."

Some of the pupils took on the case of *Chocolate v. Vanilla*, which covered the topic of which ice cream flavor is more popular, Lucas said.

"They get so into it, and they come up with arguments that are so creative. That's the best thing about being young," Lucas said. "They tried to compare the flavors, how vanilla was the base of all flavors and therefore it has to be the top flavor of ice cream."

On that recent Monday of law camp, the five firm partners offered some advice to the pupils gathered before them.

"Work hard as students and get the best grades you can, particularly in high school," said trial lawyer [Ann Marie Walsh](#).

Rowe W. Snider, a partner in the firm's business litigation and arbitration group, said: "As boring as many of you think it is, work on being a good writer."

And Snider offered a tip about the pursuit of a law degree.

"It's considered a very good training ground to do lots of other things," he said. "Going to law school creates lots of opportunities for you, even if you don't want to practice law."

Eighth-grader Fernando Ramirez, who donned a grey pin-striped suit for the first day of law camp, said he learned about the program from a flier distributed at his school, Our Lady Of Tepeyac Elementary School.

"This is answering a lot of my questions so far," Ramirez said in an interview on the walk from the law firm to the camp's DePaul classroom. "It's different than seeing it on television. It's better seeing it in person."

If he becomes a lawyer, an idea he said he has been considering, "I could protect people. If something bad happens to them, I get to justify them."

Eighth-grader Justin Reaves said he wants to be a professional baseball player when he grows up.

Still, Reaves found himself spending his last few days of summer in law camp before heading back to class at Perspectives Charter School. His participation came at the encouragement of his mother.

"She wants me to have a Plan B. She wants me to extend my opportunities," he said.

On the walk back to the DePaul classroom, Reaves seemed impressed with the "very important people" he saw at the big firm.

"It's actually pretty cool," he said.

Lawyer just might be his Plan B, he conceded.

"Or an entrepreneur," he said. "Like [the operator of] a sports store."

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