

Making it Over the Bar



CAROLYN UPSHAW-ROYAL

Carolyn Upshaw-Royal knew a good idea when she saw one, and she was determined to bring it to Lansing. The idea was a Minority Bar Passage Program that Upshaw-Royal took when she was studying to pass the bar in 1999.

Unfortunately, until now, the program in Michigan, which was modeled after a program in Chicago, was only available in Detroit, which meant that those from the Lansing area had to give up hours of study to make the trip. Upshaw-Royal promised herself that, if she passed the bar, she would bring the program to Lansing.

She passed, and the first-ever Lansing-based Minority Bar Passage Program finished its first run in July 2000, three weeks before the July Michigan bar exam.

Upshaw-Royal got interested in the law through her work with the state of Michigan. She formerly worked with the Office of Services to the Aging, helping people over 55 with economic and income issues. On insurance issues, they joined the Attorney General in litigation, and Upshaw-Royal found herself involved in things like case strategy, discovery, and research for preparing briefs.

The law school path wasn't an easy one. She was accepted in 1981, then dropped out when her son was born. She came back in 1994, but had to put the J.D. on hold while she finished her M.B.A. She finally got back on track in 1995 and finished her law degree in 1999.

But that doesn't mean that things got smoother. While in law school, her father died and on the night after her first day of the bar exam, Upshaw-Royal's husband had a fall and seriously injured himself. Up most of the night at the hospital, Upshaw-Royal was surprised when she returned to her house early the next morning to get a phone call from her husband, urging her to put in the second day at the exam and really focus. She did, and she passed the bar on her first try.

Now as a lawyer, Upshaw-Royal finds herself doing legal work for her own clients and other attorneys, but still plans to stay at the state until she retires. So, in the meantime, she

initiated the new Lansing Minority Bar Passage Program. The program has proven to be popular, and Upshaw-Royal plans not only to continue it, but to expand the program.

Although the program is based at Cooley, it is a joint venture with MSU-Detroit College of Law. Cooley provides the space and administrative support. DCL provides the bluebooks and refreshments.

Speakers in the first year's program included Dennis Donohue, assistant secretary of the Board of Law Examiners, who had tips on the multi-state exam; and Bill Rheame, a member of the Board of Law Examiners, who talked about the essay exam, how it's graded, question clusters, and strategies.

Six tutors, including Upshaw-Royal, volunteered their time to work with six students each week. Upshaw-Royal was quick to point out that this program is not in competition with other bar review programs, rather it supplements those courses.

"We're not teaching substantive law. We're teaching strategies and tips, how to structure essays, how to attack them," she explained.

Upshaw-Royal credited Kathy Day, a member of the Young Lawyers Section of the State Bar, for helping her. "Every time I had a question," Upshaw-Royal said, "she made herself available."

Upshaw-Royal plans to run the program as long as there is the support of Cooley, MSU-DCL, and the volunteers who make it a success.

The key to the program is the ongoing communication tutors maintain with the students.

"It is important to have personal and frequent contact with the students to help them when they start to stress out and when they need feedback — even when the program officially ends."

The highly qualified and energetic team included Allison Folmar, Jeff Kruse, Melissa Lopez Pope, Debra Hirsch, and Upshaw-Royal, all Cooley graduates, and Bill Burton. Both the team and the program will return again in January 2001, ready as ever to help another contingent of law school graduates prepare and pass the Michigan Bar Exam. ■