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## Mentors lay down the law for city students

**By Bridget Botelho  
Contributing Writer**

Attorney Rebecca Dupras wishes the American Bar Association's Championing Our Students program existed when she was a high school student.

"I was always kind of argumentative, and if I had access to a program like this as a kid, it would have been beneficial for me, especially with the skills you learn on presenting and public speaking," said Dupras, who started as an attorney in 2006 and now works with Providence-based Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West LLC.

Providence is one of the first cities to participate in the program, a mentorship project launched in November through the American Bar Association's Division for Public Education and the Greater Providence YMCA. The program pairs local high school students with legal professionals who serve as mentors and meet monthly at the Providence YMCA Youth Services program office for "street law" workshops and one-on-one mentoring time.

Dupras, a Rhode Island native who earned her law degree from Suffolk University Law School, got involved with the program through her mentorship of 15-year-old Lauren Roy, a Coventry resident and soon-to-be junior at the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center – better known as the Met – in Providence.

Roy took an interest in a legal career a few years ago, so when her guidance counselor mentioned a program was being developed to teach students about the legal system, she wanted to be involved. With that, Roy became one of six students picked to serve on the leadership team for development of the program. She traveled to Chicago and participated in workshops to develop the curriculum, with guidance from Dupras.

The program is in full swing now, with more than 30 students from Central, Classical and Hope High Schools and the Met meeting with mentors one Saturday of every month to learn concepts of law and how those laws apply to their daily lives. "The program gives students exposure to real-life law, not just the criminal law they see on TV," Dupras said.

A big part of the program is having lawyers and other legal professionals work with small groups of students on presentations they give to the entire group. "It helps draw out kids who are not extroverted and helps kids who are extroverted learn to get their thoughts together and focused," said Dupras, whose law practice includes estate planning, estate and trust administration and probate litigation.

While the students gain valuable skills they will use throughout their lives, program mentors also learn from their students. "It is amazing how involved and inspiring these students can be with their creative approaches to topics," Dupras said.

Melissa Walsh, director of community development for Providence YMCA youth services, said the program has helped all of the students mature and realize their potential. "These were students who were at-risk of falling through the cracks," said Walsh. "I have seen tremendous growth throughout the group, in terms of their comfort level with expressing themselves in public, development of critical-thinking skills and networking."

Roy, who is interested in being a criminal defense attorney one day, said the program has helped her with presentation skills. "Though I still get nervous doing presentations, it has gotten easier the more I do it," Roy said. The students have also benefited from a host of field trips, including to Roger Williams University School of Law and Providence City Hall.

"All of the students are highly-motivated ... but benefit from the extra support," Walsh said. "That's what a mentoring relationship is all about."



PBN PHOTO/RYAN T. CONATY  
HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE: Met Center student Lauren Roy at the offices of Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West.