

Color of Justice program gives students peek at bench

LEGAL FIELD: 81 from minority families get "speed mentoring."

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Ger Moua, 16, a student at East High in Anchorage, lives with seven sisters, one brother, her parents, who are Hmong refugees, and her grandmother. Her mother works two jobs and her father is disabled by heart problems. She wants to be the first person in her family to earn a college degree. And maybe that means a career in the law.

"My family depends a lot on me and my sisters," she said Thursday evening. "My parents will get older and need help with money, other situations."

Moua and 80 other high school and college students from across the state gathered last week to participate in Anchorage's eighth annual Color of Justice program, which aims to introduce students, particularly those from minorities, to careers in the legal field.

Wednesday evening at the Snow City Café, 30 students met lawyers, judges and other law professionals from all over the country for the "Speed Mentoring Experience." Students met one-on-one with lawyers and judges to discuss and ask personal questions regarding different careers. Alaska Supreme Court Justice Dana Fabe gave the opening remarks.

The judiciary system should be as diverse as the pool of defendants, she said.

"The vision of diversity is the vision of equality," she told the crowd.

High school students in the program toured the University of Alaska Anchorage and heard from law professors from the Pacific Northwest in presentations that looked at specific cases and various outcomes. They also participated in a mock trial on Friday afternoon.

Earlier Friday, students filled the seats in the Supreme Court courtroom at the Boney Courthouse downtown. Fabe and Superior Court Judge Stephanie Joannides handed out robes for the mock trial.

High school students Christopher Hawk, 16, an East High junior, and Daniela Martinez, 17, a West High senior, said they hoped careers in law could be shaped to fit their individual interests.

For example, Hawk hopes to combine his love for music and law, he said.

"No one in my immediate family has earned a college degree," he said. "It would be cool to be one of the first."

Martinez looks back at her first few years of high school with regret because she did not push herself academically. But the event inspired her to work harder.

"I tried but it seemed like I was going nowhere. But now I have to do something about it," she said.

Martinez eventually plans on attending Cal-Poly University in San Luis Obispo, Calif., and focus on her greatest interest -- psychology -- in order to pursue civil family law cases one day.

Joannides looked out across the courtroom right before the students put on their robes.

"Hope to see you all on the bench soon," she said.

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