

PROJECT SELF: TWENTY YEARS OF MENTORING

by CHRISTOPHER WESIERSKI



The OCBA founded Project SELF in 1995 under the leadership of OCBA President Gary M. Pohlson.

Project SELF students at a Negotiation 101 workshop at NBC Universal in Studio City

am fortunate this year to be the President of the Orange County Bar Foundation and am pleased to highlight one of the programs that the Orange County Bar Foundation (OCBF) and the Orange County Chapter of the Association of Legal Administrators (OC-ALA) has sponsored for many years. The OCBF has been in Orange County since 1969, sponsoring numerous charitable endeavors.

One of the programs that the OCBF is proud to support, along with OC-ALA, is Project SELF (Summer Employment In Law Firms). Project SELF is a program that provides Santa Ana youth with a paid eight-week summer internship at law firms and law-related businesses in Orange County. This year, 2015, marks the twentieth year anniversary since Project SELF began. Our firm was fortunate to have two interns this year through Project SELF.

Project SELF was initiated in 1995 to provide high school students the ability to reach their future goals by acquainting them with a stimulating and educational work environment. The Orange County Bar Association partnered with local non-profits to pilot the program in 1995. After its first year, the OCBF was selected to run the program in partnership with OC-ALA. Since that time, and twenty years later, the program is bigger and better than ever.

During the past twenty years, the following high schools have partnered with OCBF and OC-ALA in providing students: Century High School, Godinez High School, Middle College High School, Saddleback High School, Santa Ana High School, Segerstrom High School, Valley High School, and Santa Ana Unified School District's ROP Program.

The applications for Project SELF in the year 2015 included over 127 students from seven different high

schools. Fifty-nine students were selected for the eight-week internship in various law firms or law-related businesses throughout Orange County. The application and selection process included an essay as well as an oral interview. The interviews are conducted by a team of law firm administrators. The administrators all reported that the students were enthusiastic and it was "absolutely delightful to hear them talk about their hopes and dreams, the challenges they have faced, and their love for their families, as well as their absolute commitment to their goals" (Janet Proudfoot, OC-ALA President, speaking at the Project SELF Recognition Dinner held August 5, 2015).

To date, 800 student interns have participated in the eight-week summer program by working at law firms and law-related companies throughout Orange County.

To date, 800 student interns have participated in the eight-week summer program by working at law firms and law-related companies throughout Orange County. Project SELF has provided high school juniors, often from low-income families and/or minorities, the opportunity to explore professional careers within the legal community. They are introduced not only to lawyers, but to all individuals working in law firms or in law-related careers. Project SELF exposes students to a professional

work environment to which they may not otherwise have any access, and has the goal of investing in tomorrow's leaders. Project SELF hopefully enhances the interns' knowledge, experience, and self-esteem. We know that to be true from the essays that the Project SELF interns write after their internship.

Project SELF works to reduce the risk of juvenile delinquency by equipping youth with positive alternatives for spending their summers, access to professional career environments in spite of any social, economic, or cultural limitations, and support from positive adult role models and mentors.

Throughout the summer, many of the individuals at the law firms become invested in their intern's future and inquire about college or their future hopes and dreams.

There have been some true success stories from those individuals who have participated in Project SELF. Joel Crespo was in the Project SELF class of 1999. He participated in Project SELF and interned at AlvaradoSmith. After graduating from Valley High School in 2000, Joel attended the University of California, Irvine where he graduated with a B.A. in Criminology and a B.A. in Chicano Studies in 2006. Thereafter, he worked at the Public Defender's office for two years and then went on to law school at Boston University. He came back to work following graduation at AlvaradoSmith and now works, as of 2014, at Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom in Palo Alto, California as an associate in their litigation department.

Julia Trinh Nguyen was in the Project SELF class of 2004. She was a Project SELF intern at O'Melveny & Myers, and continued to work with O'Melveny even after her internship ended. She made a lasting impression on the staff and attorneys and worked on several large projects. After grad-

uating from Valley High School in 2005, she was accepted at UC Berkeley and graduated with honors three years later. Inspired by her experience at O'Melveny & Myers, she pursued a career in law and started law school at the University of San Diego in September 2010. During law school, she clerked with Wilson Sonsini and continued there as an associate after graduation. She returned to Orange County in 2014, and is currently an associate at Buchalter Nemer APC, where she focuses her practice on mergers and acquisitions.

Christopher Martinez was in the Project SELF class of 2009 and interned at Allen Matkins Leck Gamble Mallory & Natsis LLP. The firm was impressed by his professional demeanor, work ethic, and enthusiasm for learning. Christopher graduated from Segerstrom High School in 2010, and recently graduated from the University of California, Berkley with a major in French and Linguistics and a minor in Music. He now works for Stradling Yocca Carlson & Rauth, P.C. in San Francisco as an administrative assistant while he works on his paralegal certificate. He plans to go on to law school in a couple of years and hopes to attend Williams & Lee University to pursue a *J.D.* and dual degree in International Affairs.

Stephen Mendoza is from the Project SELF class of 2013. He was selected as a Project SELF intern for Paul Hastings LLP. He was praised while working at that office for his great assistance in each of the job assignments given to him. He was awarded a \$500 scholarship at the end of his eight-week internship. He graduated from Godinez Fundamental High School in 2014, and currently is studying business

economics at UCLA.

These individuals are just four examples of those 800 students who have participated in the program and have gone on to wonderful jobs in law-related or other businesses.

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Every year the Project SELF class has a recognition dinner. This year, that dinner was held on August 5, 2015 at the Chuck Jones Center with the Honorable Kim Hubbard as the keynote speaker. Each student was recognized with a Certificate of Achievement from the Orange County Bar Foundation and the Orange County Chapter of the Association of Legal Administrators, as well as a Certificate of Recognition from the City of Santa Ana, a Certificate of Recognition from Senator Janet Nguyen's Office, and a Certificate of Recognition from Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez's Office.

Scholarships are awarded at the Project SELF recognition dinner. The OC-ALA awards five \$500 scholarships to Project SELF interns who go above and beyond the expectations of the program and their sponsors. They also demonstrate a strong desire to attend college upon completion of their senior year of high school in 2016. Each applicant had to complete an application, write an essay on valuable lessons they learned during their internship, and how those lessons will be applied in the future. Each intern had to get a letter of recommendation from their own law firm. The committee had a very difficult time selecting the five winners who were presented with their \$500 scholarships.

In addition, the Honorable Kim Hubbard presented six scholarships to six different students from the Robert A. Banyard Inn of Court in similar

amounts. The six scholarship winners from Banyard also wrote essays. The essays were reviewed by the Banyard Board. The Board was so impressed that two board members funded an extra scholarship on their own.

The Orange County Bar Association, as well as related businesses, have been so generous through the years, and the OCBF and the OC-ALA would like to thank all those who participated in 2015 in sponsoring a Project SELF intern, as well as those who have participated for these past twenty years. Congratulations to the interns who go on to make a difference and to all those firms, individuals, and businesses who made a difference to the interns. This program changes not only the interns, but also the businesses where they work, and provides positive rewards to both.

Should you wish to participate in the Project SELF program in 2016 please contact either Karen Ruan at kruan@ocbarfoundation.org or Nancy Garcia at ngarcia@ocbarfoundation.org.



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