



Lewis & Clark scholarship honors judge, serves minority law students

By: [jessica.swanson](#) in Construction on December 3, 2003 1:00 am

Multnomah County Circuit Court Judge Roosevelt Robinson left a hole when he retired from the bench last December because of failing health. He had been one of two African Americans among the county's 37 judges, a founding member of the Association of Oregon Black Lawyers and alumnus co-founder of Lewis & Clark Law School Minority Law Student's Association.

But Roosevelt Robinson is not just a name on many charters; he is an ongoing presence in many lives. And because of a scholarship being established at Lewis & Clark Law School in his honor, Judge Robinson will continue to cultivate the diverse field of Oregon lawyers and law students he worked his entire career to build.

Attorney Chuck Tauman, a former classmate of Robinson's, approached the law school this fall about establishing an endowment in the judge's name that would bring more minority students into the law school – and keep them in the state to practice.

"Roosevelt had often expressed his concern about the fact that there weren't more minority lawyers in Oregon," he said. "(The scholarship) seemed to be a perfect fit between Roosevelt's goals and the goals of the law school."

The scholarship fund will assist minority students facing financial hurdles to achieve a law school education.

Recipients would also commit to live and practice law in Oregon for at least three years following graduation. The law school is looking to raise \$50,000 before the end of the year. Robinson himself will participate in choosing the first recipient, who will be admitted next fall.

Robinson, originally from Georgia, said minorities who come to Oregon to study law need time to realize the opportunities of living and practicing here. If students stay in the state for a short time to practice, chances are greater they will stick around for the better part of their careers.

"We're trying to diversify the bar from the judiciary on down to solo practitioners," he said. "If we give a scholarship, they can see some of the opportunities that are open to them – and some may stay around and help us."

Robinson believes the "comfort zone" that exists between a client and an attorney of the same race or socioeconomic background can foster a greater understanding of the judicial system among the people who find themselves in it again and again and perhaps cut back on recidivism. Robinson uses his own disadvantaged upbringing to bring sensitivity to his practice.

"When someone says, 'By the grace of God, go I,' I understand it," he said. "I understand how you got yourself into the situation that you are in. I can't say I'll get you off, but I am sensitive to where you are, and I will be in your corner all the way."

"It might be a cultural thing. A nonminority lawyer might miss nuances, the subtleties of language and communication. There might be another message, (and a minority lawyer) can humanize the client before the judge and before the jury."

Once minority lawyers are practicing in Oregon, said Robinson, there are other hurdles to making it to the bench, such as relatively low pay for judges as compared to attorneys in private practice, and the high loan repayments most minority students carry out of law school. Also, said Robinson, students just don't stick around to see the long-term opportunities in places like the Oregon Court of Appeals or Supreme Court, where there have never been African American judges.

According to the Oregon State Bar Association, only 642 of the state's 12,000 practicing lawyers identify themselves as minority. (Almost half decline to identify.) About 10 percent of all current Oregon law students self-identify as minority. Eighteen percent of Lewis & Clark 2002 graduates identified themselves as minority, and just over half stayed in the state – very slightly more, even, than nonminority students.

Stella Kinue Manabe, administrator of Oregon State Bar Affirmative Action Program, said that Oregon law schools and the state bar rely heavily on out-of-state minorities to diversify the landscape. The bar has been aggressively trying to retain minority lawyers through programs such as Opportunities for Law in Oregon, established by the affirmative action program in 1998.

"The bar has done creative programming to recruit and retain ethnic minorities, and here Judge Robinson is doing it on a very personal level," she said. "If you only give money, that's the least successful (tool)."

He has acted as a mentor in countless lives, say his friends, professionally, personally and academically, especially at his alma mater, Lewis & Clark. Through the Minority Law Student's Association, Robinson addressed academics, bar passage and study habits, setting up preparation exams for students and personally advocating for individuals. "Another way of giving back to the community is going back to the school you attended to assist the students," he said. "I'm looking at these bright people coming in, saying this person has the ability to go higher than I did. It's my responsibility to mentor these young people."

Contributions can be made to the Roosevelt Robinson Minority Scholarship Fund, Lewis & Clark Law School, 10015 S.W. Terwilliger Blvd., Portland, OR 97219. For more information, call Sarah Nevue, assistant dean for external relations, 503-768-6641.