


2-21-2018

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Michael M. Bowden

Roger Williams University School of Law

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Recommended Citation

Bowden, Michael M., "Newsroom: A Mentor And A Friend 2-21-2018" (2018). *Life of the Law School (1993-)*. 628.
https://docs.rwu.edu/law_archives_life/628

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February 21, 2018

Newsroom

A Mentor and a Friend

How a young Dominican woman – not yet out of high school – found herself among law students attending a chat with famed U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.



Nicole Verdi '14 and Ashley Rodriguez Image Credit: Andrea Hansen

February 21, 2018
Michael M. Bowden

Most of the audience for [Ruth Bader Ginsburg's recent appearance at Roger Williams University School of Law](#) consisted of current law students. But one young woman sitting among them – in rapt attention and at close proximity to the famed U.S. Supreme Court Justice – wasn't even out of high school yet.

Ashley Rodriguez, a 16-year old junior at Classical High School in Providence, attended Justice Ginsburg's appearance as a special guest of [Nicole Verdi '14](#), an associate with [Adler, Pollock & Sheehan P.C.](#), vice president of the Law Alumni Association and chair of [Youth In Action](#), a

Providence-based youth leadership program focusing on social justice, community, and peer education.

Rodriguez was duly impressed.

“Justice Ginsburg is so inspiring in so many ways,” she said. “She’s like a book. She’s lived through so many different epochs and phases of our history; she’s had so many experiences and hardships – and yet she remains hopeful. I feel more secure being in this country because of that; knowing that there is someone like her standing up for us. She has so much power and knowledge – and when she says that we should remain hopeful, she knows why she’s saying it.”

A native of the Dominican Republic who immigrated to the United States five years ago, Rodriguez is herself the daughter of a lawyer – *and* she knows what it feels like to be an outsider.

“One of the things I struggled the most with, when I first came to the United States, was fitting in – especially because I didn’t know the language,” she said. “I knew I had to face up to these challenges and really get myself involved.”

Youth in Action seemed like a perfect place to start. According to its mission statement, the organization zooms in on “structural problems” – such as community violence, food insecurity, and entry into higher education or training – “that often hit youth of color the hardest.” By providing “an open and safe space where youth can voice their opinions and experiences,” YIA strives to build “power, leadership and action amongst youth in frontline communities.”

Rodriguez, then a high school freshman, visited YIA’s Broad Street headquarters and promptly “fell in love with the space,” she said. “It felt like home. It felt amazing to be in a place where we could learn about what’s going on in the community and how to improve it.”

One program Rodriguez worked on, for example, was a bicycle safety initiative called Bike the Night. “In the urban area where I live, we don’t see people biking because they don’t feel safe,” she explained. “Then we look at the East Side of Providence and *everyone’s* biking. And we want to understand why; why is that? Why don’t we feel safe? And how can we fix those issues?”

One evening while attending a session at YIA’s Broad Street headquarters in Providence, Rodriguez met Verdi, and the two hit it off.

“I got involved with Youth In Action in part to make sure that I remained involved in the community and to try and make a difference,” Verdi explained. “My everyday practice is more focused on business and helping businesses develop in Rhode Island, all of which is extremely important – but it’s not quite the same.”

In 2017, Verdi got RWU Law involved via a program called “A Day in the Life,” which brought Youth In Action students for a tour of her *alma mater* and a lunch panel with current law

students, followed by meeting a Superior Court judge and then a networking event with law school alums and members of the Rhode Island Supreme Court.

“It was a really exciting, successful day,” Verdi said, “and Ashley was one of the youths who participated. She came up to me later and told me how much she loved it, and how she was thinking of law school because of it.”

Rodriguez noted, “One of the reasons I want to go to law school is to fight for the rights of people who can’t stand up for themselves, especially if they come from another country. Maybe something like immigration law would be the best fit for me, because I’ve been through that process. My involvement with Youth In Action helped open my mind and show me I could actually do it.”

Verdi decided to underline that impression by inviting Ashley to the Ginsburg event as her guest. “I felt she would be the perfect candidate, because she showed so much interest, and also because she is extremely hardworking and extremely studious,” Verdi said.

The respect runs both ways.

“Justice Ginsburg definitely inspired me, but Nicole inspires me too!” Rodriguez said “She’s my mentor. But she’s also my friend.”