

Mentoring youth toward Broader Horizons



Story by Charlene Hankinson

Roberta Phillip '98 is determined to make a difference for at-risk youth involved in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. For her passionate commitment to helping youth see greater potential in themselves, she has been recognized with a scholarship in her name to assist in making higher education more than a dream for these young students.

A native of Trinidad who grew up in New York City, Phillip graduated from The University of Findlay in 1998 with a degree in biology. Her campus memories include working at the radio station, WLFC-FM, and participating in Wilderness Club, where she was president her senior year. She has fond memories of Dwight Moody, Ed.D., who was her adviser. "He definitely was always encouraging," she said.

Following graduation, she joined the Americorps program and went on to teach high school biology and chemistry in Key West, Fla., for more than three years. Her experiences helped her decide that she wanted to earn a higher degree that would enable her to affect policy for youth,

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she said, leading her to enroll in the Lewis & Clark Law School in Portland, Ore.

While in law school, Phillip discovered that she missed working with young people, and she wanted to stay in touch with them and their issues. "I wanted to get back to working with at-risk youth in particular," she noted. She began looking for an appropriate high school and found Rosemary Anderson Alternative High School in Portland that primarily serves at-risk low-income students of color. "For the students, it's their last-ditch attempt at high school," Phillip explained. She began teaching street law, an introduction to personal rights, as part of a government class.

"I realized that there was a lot that my fellow law students and I could give in terms of mentorship to the community," she said.

“So I wanted to create an easy way for law students to give back because they’re very strapped for time and kind of in this bubble of privilege, being very self-absorbed with education. I wanted to create a mechanism to give back easily.”

In 2004, her second year in law school, she set up a mentoring program that matched students from Rosemary Anderson High School with members of the Black Law Student Association and the Minority Law Student Association. “I decided I would tap into those groups because the kids at the high school were predominantly kids of color,” she remarked. She also wanted the law students to learn that at-risk youth really benefit from positive role models and having a one-one-one relationship. “Just being there, providing a supportive outlet for them, goes a long way in creating a sense of self and what they’re capable of doing,” she said.

“The goal of the program is for at-risk youth to be able to look to their mentors, see themselves and dream more and achieve more than they otherwise thought possible,” Phillip said. Planned activities include having law students host their mentees for a day at Lewis & Clark Law School. The high school students tour campus, speak with a law professor, and participate in a mock lecture and a mock trial. Phillip commented that this is often the first time these students have been recognized for their intelligence and encouraged to think that college could be a possibility for themselves.

Although Phillip graduated from law school in 2006, she continues to be involved, instilling her vision for the program. In its fifth year, the mentoring program has served more than 70 at-risk youth. “The program is an entity at the law school now. The legwork is really done in setting the program up. In terms of longevity, I made sure it was a line item in the Minority Law Student budget and the Black Law Student budget,” she said. She also makes sure the program is handed over to a second-year law student and a third-year law student every year,

and meets personally with them. Phillip arranged for a high school counselor to serve as a liaison for the program. “She’s the eyes and ears at the high school level. That’s why I think it works so well,” she observed.

In recognition of her efforts, the Black Law Student Association, through the Lewis and Clark Law School, instituted the Roberta Phillip Scholarship to benefit students who graduate from Rosemary Anderson Alternative High School. A reception and fundraiser honoring Phillip was held on April 26, 2008.

Phillip also serves on the board of the Oregon Minority Lawyers Association and is chair of the board for the Pangaea Project, a 10-month leadership development program. Pangaea provides at-risk youth with a global perspective by sending them to Ecuador or Thailand for five weeks to work on social justice issues.

In March 2008, Phillip joined The National Crittenton Foundation where she serves as director of policy and programs. The foundation is an umbrella organization for 26 agencies in 24 states that serve at-risk youth and their families who are involved in some system of care, such as foster care or the juvenile justice system.

Crittenton agencies serve primarily teen-aged women, and some young men, with after school programs, residential treatment programs and others. Some agencies provide transi-

tional independent living programs designed to support young women through their early 20s, Phillip said. “Also, we have young women who come in with babies, or give birth while they are at our agencies, and so their children are part of the programs, as well,” she noted.

While the Crittenton agencies provide the direct services, Phillip’s job at the national organization is to create and evaluate programs and provide support for program implementation for its agencies. “The work, honestly, is exactly the type of work that I had hoped to be doing with my life, so I feel like I’m in a position where I can effect change for kids in a positive way,” Phillip said.



Brieanna Lundy, a student from Rosemary Anderson High School, has been mentored by Roberta Phillip for the past three years.