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PROFILES

PEOPLES' COLLEGE OF LAW

WHAT HAPPENS TO A DREAM DEFERRED? . . . IT DRIES UP AND FESTERS LIKE A RAISIN IN THE SUN.

LANGSTON HUGHES¹

Peoples College of Law was once only a dream and an ideal; it is now a reality. Traditionally, legal institutions have promoted the concept that "successful" lawyering entails joining an elite law firm that is dedicated to maintaining the socio-economic status quo. Implicit in this philosophy is a virtual disregard of the unequal treatment of women, Third World and working class people. This dilemma was the impetus for the creation of the Peoples College of Law (hereinafter referred to as Peoples). The seed was planted for realization of this goal when the first class enrolled at Peoples in the fall of 1974.

Peoples established as its primary goal the development and training of lawyers committed to representing the "underrepresented" people of this country. With this philosophy in mind, the school seeks to train individuals from disadvantaged communities who are committed to social change. Notable organizations, such as the National Lawyer's Guild, the National Conference of Black Lawyers, the Asian Law Collective and the La Raza Law Student Association, combined their efforts to create this unique institution of higher learning.

In order to meet the goals and follow the philosophy upon which Peoples was founded, the school strives for a student enrollment that is reflective of its dedication to social change. According to Professor Mana Vargas-Rodriguez, one of the founders of the school, "Everything is falling into place just the way it was planned; we have fulfilled our goal of having two-thirds Third World students and 50 percent women."

Three excellent examples of Peoples' commitment to produce people's lawyers are Anna, Alfonso and Gregg. Anna, a thirty-four year old Native-American woman left the reservation seven years ago believing it would be easier to obtain an education outside of the reservation. However, American society posed tremendous obstacles for achievement of this end. Despite these roadblocks, Anna graduated from Peoples and remains steadfast in her conviction to serve the legal needs of numerous Native Americans still relegated to life on reservations.

Alfonso, another product of Peoples, has a somewhat different background than Anna. He is a Chicano, a high school drop-out, and a Vietnam veteran. Historically, veterans of wars, such as the Spanish-American War, the Korean War, and World Wars I and II, were considered heroes. In return for serving their country the veterans of these wars were given considerable respect and assisted by the government in finding a "place in society." Ironically, after the Vietnam War, these veterans were relegated to the status

1. L. HUGHES, INT'L LIBRARY OF AFRO-AMERICAN LIFE AND HISTORY 158 (1951).

of second-class citizens or worse and as a result, for many Vietnam veterans, this war has not yet ended. They continue to fight a war against the American government for adequate medical care and for assistance in finding employment. Alfonso, as well as many other Vietnam veterans, feels the system used and discarded him.

In light of the problems Vietnam veterans face, whether they be financial, emotional or medical, very few veterans consider or choose to become attorneys. However, just ten years after leaving Vietnam, Alfonso has not only become an attorney, he is a people's attorney. He is currently the National Head and California's legal advisor/director of the Veteran's Services of the G.I. Forum. In his spare time, he practices law out of his home, providing free legal representation for persons charged with criminal misdemeanors. Both Anna and Alfonso are exemplary of Peoples graduates.

Gregg, another graduate, came to Peoples College of Law after spending two and a half years in a traditional law school. Although, Peoples was among his first choices, financial considerations forced him to select a law school that could offer financial assistance. Gregg decided to transfer to Peoples as a result of his frustration with traditional law schools which did not adequately equip him to work in the community. The decision to transfer was well made because Peoples' curriculum fully prepared Gregg to exercise all his options.

A former Peoples' recruitment officer observed that: "the advocacy of our applicants as community or labor organizers is their most important asset. Learning the law is a complement to better assist students in their great endeavor to initiate social change through legal means or community organizing." Unlike "traditional" law schools, Peoples' admissions criteria focuses more on an applicant's political background and community involvement than their academic record.

In its ever-growing effort to extend assistance and reinforce strong ties with the community, Peoples recently established a Lawyering Process program with the Community Services Organization. Students now have an opportunity to learn the intricacies of the judicial system while simultaneously assisting the Community Services Organization in its efforts to provide sorely needed legal assistance to the working class of Los Angeles.

In addition, the College has recently become a member of the Community Based Education Clearinghouse. This is a national organization composed of numerous alternative educational institutions and membership may be as important as funding and recruitment for Peoples College of Law. As a result of this gradual interfacing with the Clearinghouse, Peoples may gain visibility on a national level.

Peoples is presently in the process of seeking accreditation. In light of this, all first year students are required to take the First Year Law Student's Examination. The students at Peoples have consistently achieved a higher passage rate than the state-wide average. This is partly attributable to the individual tutorial programs conducted for all first year students. The high degree of cooperation and continued support that new students receive helps alleviate the inherent pressures of law school.

Graduates from Peoples are practicing in the Public Defenders Office, legal aid clinics, law collectives or managing their own community law of-

fices. The school has its own legal clinic which serves the surrounding community. More importantly, Peoples has been successful in educating law students outside the traditional parameters of other legal institutions. If you are an activist who would like to use your law degree as a tool of justice for representation of the poor and oppressed, Peoples College of Law would like to hear from you.