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# Strengthening the bonds of our community

## ON YOUR MIND

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New

By Merle F. Wilberding - Guest columnist

What can we do to strengthen the bonds of our community, to improve the social connections within our community, and do things that will strengthen us as a community and that will strengthen us as a people?

This past April, Dayton Daily News associate editor Ron Rollins, in the "Today's moderator" in this section, urged all of us to strengthen the bonds of our community, reminding us that it is the small steps that often make the biggest impact, suggesting that enough small steps can make a very big impact. Some of these steps are being taken already, including the "Learn to Earn" program, the "Read On" program and the "ReadySetSoar" program. These are all good programs and deserve the support and participation by our community.

This past summer, I had the opportunity to observe and participate in another program that can strengthen the bonds of our community. This program is really a gateway to increasing over time the diversity in leadership, specifically in Ohio's law schools and the legal profession. Thanks to a collaborative effort initiated by the Supreme Court of Ohio, the General Assembly and the Ohio State Bar Foundation, the Law & Leadership Institute introduces high school students in underserved communities to higher education and the legal profession.

Law & Leadership has a fixed curriculum designed to jump-start these students into college planning, law and literature, personal leadership, and core academic skills.

Dayton is one of six cities in Ohio that promotes this program. Statewide, more than 350 students participated this year. In the Dayton area, 31 freshmen, 11 sophomores, 11 juniors and seven seniors participated. The majority of these students are racial minorities, many of whom will be the first in their family to attend college. More importantly, the program connects underserved students to lawyers and leaders at a time in their lives when these students can be inspired to identify goals and understand that they can achieve those goals.

In Dayton, the program is sponsored and hosted by the University of Dayton School of Law. It was inaugurated by Professor Dennis Greene and is currently being directed by Professor Maureen Anderson. At the same time, it is a real community effort, involving many lawyers, educators and other leaders from the community to share their learning experiences with the students – speakers such as Judge Jeffrey Froelich, Judge Deirdre Logan, Gary Leppla, Jeff Swillinger, Charles Allbery and Diane Marx.

One of the real benefits of the program is that they are eligible for a summer internship with a law firm after their second year in the program. This introduces students into a professional setting and gives them the opportunity to learn and to interact with lawyers. One of the things they may learn is that every lawyer has his or her own story about how they became a lawyer and the students will quickly discover that their own career path may not be as different as they thought. Those "backyard to courtyard" discussions encourage these students to believe that they, too, can have their dreams, that they, too, can succeed in their goals.

During the law firm internship, they have the opportunity to attend courtroom trials and administrative hearings, as well as observing conferences and other legal experiences. Among those hosting interns this past summer were Judge Alice McCollum and several law firms, including Thompson-Hine, Dinsmore-Shohl, and Coolidge-Wall.

The Ohio State Bar Foundation provided all of the funding for the program in its formative years and still provides funds, for which everyone is grateful. But the funding has been cut in the last couple of years and UD, as the local host, is seeking local sponsors to maintain this important program, a program that deserves the community's support.

What better way to strengthen the bonds of our community than to give the underserved children in our community the opportunity and encouragement to learn about law and learn about leadership? More importantly, it gives them the opportunity to learn about goals, to dream about goals and be assured that they can achieve those goals. These children are our future community. This program creates and opens a gateway to opportunity that will contribute to diversity in our education system and in our legal system. The bonds of our community will be strengthened, and we will be a better people.



Merle F. Wilberding is a Dayton attorney.