

Promoting Diversity in the Courts: Salihah Denman

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, news and insight from the New York Courts. I'm John Caher.

In this Diversity Dialogue segment, we are going to revisit a topic we discussed a few years back and that is the New York Legal Opportunity Program or "NY LEO," an initiative of the New York State Judicial Institute established to promote academic success for individuals historically underrepresented in the legal system.

Our guest today is attorney Salihah Denman, the program director for the LEO program. Right now, Salihah is recruiting applicants for the 2023 LEO program. Salihah, thank you for coming on the program. Let's start at the beginning. What is LEO?

Salihah Denman: So LEO is a program that was started by Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye in 2007 to serve New York State residents that are from groups traditionally underrepresented in the legal field. It's a free program that exposes fellows to the rigors of the first year of law school.

They receive courses in contracts, torts, legal research and writing, civil procedure, and also participate in experiential learning opportunities like moot court, traveling to the New York State Court of Appeals and the New York State legislature. They also receive skills workshops that provide them with foundational skills needed for law school success. In addition, they also learn about working skills and meet attorneys and judges from across the state who share career advice with the fellows.

John Caher: So, when and why was it started? You indicated it was Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye, so it goes back a little while. But do you know when exactly and why? What was the impetus for it?

Salihah Denman: It was 2007 that the program began and really it was necessary to equalize the playing field. The majority of the fellows that participate in the program are first generation in their family to attend law school and some of them are first generation in their families to even attend college. So they needed access to information about law school expectations and how to succeed because otherwise they'd really be at a significant disadvantage when entering law school. The LEO program was created to make sure that the students know what to expect and are prepared for that initial entry into law school so that they can be successful.

John Caher: I see. Now how long is the program?

Salihah Denman: The program is five weeks long and the length of the program was modified a bit from six weeks for this year for a couple of reasons. The first reason is to permit the fellows some extra time to work and save before law school. A lot of our fellows need to work to save money before they begin law school so they can afford to go. And another is because the LEO program provides letters of support for the fellows when they're wait-listed to law schools that they would like to attend.

So we actually send a letter of support upon completion of the program. Modifying the length of the program allows the letters of support to be submitted to the law schools at a time where it can still have an impact on their decision making.

John Caher: That sounds like a pretty intensive five weeks.

Salihah Denman: It is a *very* intensive five weeks and the students really get exposed to a lot during that time. I mean, they have moot court. They have these skills workshops. They get to meet attorneys and judges and really hear about their past.

It was dormant for a couple of years during COVID, but when we restarted we really wanted to give the students the theme that the entry into the law in a successful legal career is not necessarily a straight line. And while some students begin law school and meet their goal according to whatever their plan is, a lot of students don't have that opportunity and they might have to go in different directions to get to their ultimate goal. So we have attorneys and judges come to speak to them about those challenges and express to them that they can still meet their goals.

John Caher: Now I know the program operates out of the Judicial Institute and the Judicial Institute operates out of Pace University School of Law, which is in White Plains. Are there housing arrangements for students who don't live in or near White Plains?

Salihah Denman: Yes. So the students actually receive a single dorm rooms at the Elizabeth Haub School of Law in their dorms. We have resident assistance to help the students acclimate to the environment and that are familiar with the White Plains area. So there is housing available for students.

John Caher: How is the program funded?

Salihah Denman: The program is funded by the New York State Legislature. The program began, like I said, in 2007, but there was a period from 2011 through 2015 that the program could not be implemented because of a lack of

funding. The person that ensured that LEO would be funded and continue to be funded by making it a budget line item is Assemblywoman Latoya Joyner.

Assemblywoman Joyner herself graduated from the LEO program in the 2009 cohort. And after she was elected in November of 2014, she made the refunding of New York LEO a priority and she remains actively involved in the program. She did come to speak with our fellows last year. She does come to speak to the fellows every year. The moot court component of the program is new. And so we named the program, that portion of the program, the competition itself, after Assemblywoman Joyner to honor her dedication and continued support of the program.

John Caher: What a great example of paying it back.

Salihah Denman: Yes. And she is. She's just very invested. She reaches out to see how things are going, if there's anything that's needed, and she's just very dedicated to the program, which is wonderful to see.

John Caher: Now is there any additional support provided to LEO graduates once they're out of LEO and into law school?

Salihah Denman: Yes. So once they have graduated law school, they can continue to rely on the LEO program as a resource. I often get calls from last year's fellows and sometimes it's simple questions— "I'm not feeling well and I don't think I'm going to be able to take my midterm. How do I let my professor know? What steps do I need to take?" And sometimes it's just that they need a pep talk before midterms to know that they can do it, and maybe ask questions to make sure that they're properly prepared for that.

So they can continue to reach out. And we also always invite them to apply for teaching assistant positions for the following years program. So we definitely continue to be there as a resource.

John Caher: What a wonderful program. Now I'm going to throw you a little bit of a curve ball because the recovering journalist in me wants to know more about Salihah. Now I know a little bit about you. I know you have a ton of experience as a law professor, as an attorney for the child, as a judicial clerk, as an appellate advocate. And I know you've served as Vice-Chair of the Family Law Practice Section of the Metropolitan Black Bar. So, what inspired you to take this position?

Salihah Denman: I am actually a first generation immigrant from Suriname, South America. My family came here when the government was overthrown in 1982. And though I did have some family members here, I didn't have any family members that had gone to law school before. So, when I entered law school, it was really overwhelming. I had no idea what to expect. I had no idea what to do.

Now, I was fortunate because I attended Howard University School of Law and the law school is an extremely supportive environment. So my professors really were actively reaching out to us to make sure that we were acclimated. But that's not often the experience in law schools for various reasons.

I wanted to make sure that students similar to my position and students not so similar, but with the same challenges, had that preparation. And with the feedback that I get from the students, I think we've met that. Because they say, "Well, I'm so confident because I read this case; I had already read it in LEO. So when the professor called up me, I knew what the answer was because I knew the case and I was familiar with the case." I love to see that confidence because I wish I would've had that when I started law school.

John Caher: I can see just by the expression on your face how gratifying that is when you get that sort of feedback!

Salihah Denman: It really is. And I love speaking to the fellows that I've worked hard and the JI overall works hard to keep them connected and make them feel comfortable. And that's part of the reason why we make sure that it's law school professors that teach the program because we want them to know what it's like because law school, that environment, can be very intimidating, the cold calling. It's just very intimidating. So we really seek out law school professors to make sure that the students understand what that process is like, but also understand that the professors are people and approachable and that they can do that in law school.

John Caher: What a remarkable program. Now I know we're in the application phase right now. So how many spots are available?

Salihah Denman: There are 25 spots available this year and the applications are considered on a rolling basis. So as they come in, if the student is qualified for the program, they're accepted and the application process continues until all the spots are filled.

John Caher: So if someone is interested, what's the next step? How do they proceed?

Salihah Denman: They should, number one, make sure that they qualify for the program. So you must be a New York State resident, you must have taken the LSAT or the GRE, and you have to have applications pending at a law school. So if they meet those requirements and they're interested in applying for the program, they should go to www.newyorkcourts.gov/attorney/leo. Or they could simply Google "New York Leo" and they will get to the page and find the online application.

John Caher: Well, thank you for sharing that information and thank you for what you're doing. This is a very important program and I think it's something that pays dividends for generations to come.

Salihah Denman: Yes, I think it definitely does. And one thing I forgot to mention that I must say, the program is free!

John Caher: Thank you so much, Salihah.

Salihah Denman: Thank you.