



# SHOW YOU CARE!

## HELP BUILD A “BRIDGE TO LAW SCHOOL” FOR FSU’S FIRST-GENERATION CARE STUDENTS

By Kelly O’Keefe



The Florida State University Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE) provides orientation and academic support for students who are among the first in their family to attend college. These first-generation students often

face unique challenges in college because they do not have someone with the experience and institutional knowledge needed to navigate higher education. CARE provides these students with the necessary tools, resources, and support network they need to flourish in the collegiate environment. CARE challenges the students throughout their undergraduate careers with rigorous and rewarding programming that emphasizes academic excellence. The programming is proven to be effective and has gained national recognition. CARE has successfully contributed to the retention and graduation of countless undergraduate students who have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education. The first-year retention rate for CARE students tops 96%, two percentage points higher than FSU’s overall 94% retention rate.

FSU’s CARE program, the FSU College of Law, Stearns Weaver Miller, P.A., the William H. Stafford American Inn of Court, and Tallahassee Bar Association are currently partnering to develop a program that will introduce CARE students to the many opportunities that law school brings, and give the students real world examples of those opportunities in the legal profession. Many CARE students have never considered law as a profession, and we intend to change that. We are building a “Bridge to Law School” that will not only introduce students to the possibility of a law career, but will help them make a legal career a reality.

Using a culturally responsive socialization framework, the “Bridge to Law School” program will integrate academic preparation, mentoring, and professional development to demystify the law school application process, the law school experience, and the practice of law. With the help of a supportive network, students will learn how to translate their academic and professional experiences into a law school application portfolio and identify opportunities that will make them more competitive applicants. We will also prepare the students for what to expect in law school and educate them about the very important contributions they can make to society as lawyers.

How do we plan to achieve those goals? With the help of many. During our planning process, the stars just keep aligning. We now have an energized group of entities and organizations that are ready to make the “Bridge to Law School” a reality over the next several years. The idea started with my firm’s Equity and Justice Project, which identified possible ways to achieve racial equity and social justice. Participating in that program led me and my colleague at Stearns Weaver Miller, Melanie Leitman, to realize that racial equity in the legal profession will never happen if we focus only on the hiring process. We saw the need to start earlier and build a “Bridge to Law School” for the broader population.

Then we met Sam Seiglie, a CARE Alumnus who blew us away in her law clerk interview. She educated us about the CARE program and inspired us to take action. The plan for the “Bridge to Law School” began to take shape, and during that time we learned we had another CARE Alumnus in our firm, our paralegal Debra Barrett, who was ready to help. We also learned that our then-Law Clerk, now Associate, Landus Anderson, had already started

building bridges to law school by volunteering in the Nims Middle School Pre-Law Magnet Academy of Legal Studies for students who aspire to become lawyers, judges, legal writers, forensic scientists, and more.

While our initial efforts with the “Bridge to Law School” will focus on undergraduate students, ultimately we intend to engage students of all ages in this program. In addition to Landus’ work with the Nims Pre-Law Magnet Academy, Stearns Weaver Miller attorneys and staff are currently tutoring students at Bond Elementary School. We look forward to a future in which many of these elementary students see the legal profession as an option, and the “Bridge to Law School” as one of the pathways to get there.

We are happy to report that Phase I of the “Bridge to Law School”—the Mentorship Program—is now underway! We encourage Tallahassee Bar members to participate by becoming mentors. We are putting together mentorship teams that will consist of a CARE student, a law student, and an attorney from our local legal community. The attorneys will be asked to share knowledge and advice that will help the students successfully navigate law school and develop a fulfilling and meaningful legal career. Stearns Weaver Miller is hosting a kick-off coffee meet and greet event later this month, and the Tallahassee Bar Association April meeting will be a Table for Eight style event with the CARE student mentees who are part of this program. Mark your calendars for that meeting, at which TBA will also announce the recipient of the Champion for Diversity in the Legal Profession Award.

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Kelly is a shareholder at Stearns Weaver Miller where she focuses her practice on Estate, Probate, and Trust Litigation.

## **YOUR PARTICIPATION WILL HELP MAKE “BRIDGE TO LAW SCHOOL” A SUCCESS!**

We plan to have the full program up and running beginning in summer of 2024. CARE students will ultimately apply for the program and, in addition to receiving mentoring, will participate in projects and classes designed to help them navigate the law school application process, law school, and the pursuit of a legal career. Law students and attorneys will be an integral part of the program, giving the CARE students guidance and advice that will ensure their success. Our ultimate goal is to make the “Bridge to Law School” program a win-win for everyone involved—including you! Join us and show that you CARE!

**If you are interested in serving on one of the “Bridge to Law School” mentoring teams, please contact me or Melanie Leitman:**

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