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**BAR PRESIDENT** Eugene Pettis, above right, shares career advice with law students Charles Gee, left, and Lionel "Ali" Bryan at the 10th Annual Minority Mentoring Picnic in Hialeah November 9. Law students from all over the state — and even some from out of state — gathered at Amelia Earhart Park hoping to receive advice from lawyers and judges while they work to get their law degrees and enter the legal profession. "It's not easy to be successful at anything, but you can become the lawyer you want to be," Pettis said. "That's what I want you to leave here believing, and I tell you that with full confidence because I'm sure some of our paths are common, but I've never let where I started define where I was going."

## Thousands gather for annual Minority Mentoring Picnic

## By Megan E. Davis

*Associate Editor*

Intermittent rain and shine did little to dampen spirits at the 10th Annual Minority Mentoring Picnic at Amelia Earhart Park in Hialeah November 9.

"To have the weather as inclement as it is and still see all of the people out here I think speaks to the strength of the picnic," said Florida Bar President Eugene Pettis, donning shorts and straw hat in hand. "It's truly a picnic that has such a defined purpose in the lives of so many people."

John Kozyak, founder of the picnic, said he expected 3,500 people at the event.

Those include law students, recognizable by red "I need a mentor" stickers, crowded under the Law Student Mentoring and Networking tent seeking words of wisdom from seasoned attorneys and judges.

Meeting with the students was "heartwarming," Pettis said.

"It's not easy to be successful at anything, but you can become the lawyer you want to be," he told them. "That's what I want you to leave here believing, and I tell you that with full confidence because I'm sure some of our paths are common, but I've never let where I started define where I was going."

Pettis challenged the students to use the picnic to their advantage and reach out to the many lawyers and judges wearing blue "I need a mentee" stickers.

"Out there is someone who can take you to the next level," he said. "None of us have gotten to where we are on our own. There have been people who have given us opportunities that have lifted us and continue to lift us today."

In the way Pettis advised, hundreds of students moved from tent to tent sponsored by voluntary bar associations, law firms, and government entities, making new connections.

Helene Wilson, a 1L at the University of Miami, said she's already planning to attend next year's picnic.

"I connected with a lot of good people, talked about internship opportunities, and got information from several law firms," she said. "It's a wonderful event and something I'm very grateful for."

Kevin Piere, a 3L at Florida International University, agreed.

"You get to talk to a lot of people, you get free food, and you get to mingle with lots of different law students," he said.

Most importantly, Piere walked away with job prospects.

"I wanted to see if any firms are hiring first-year associates," he said. "I talked to a bunch of different



people and there might be a few possibilities out there, so it was worth it.”

In hopes of creating more opportunities for students, the Bar’s Business Law Section presented a \$1,000 donation to Kozyak and issued a friendly challenge to other Bar sections and divisions to follow suit.

The money will be used to help underwrite clerkships, fellowships, and internships for students.



In addition to networking, attendees played volleyball, enjoyed hayrides, and chose from an enormous assortment of food — everything from paella to grilled lamb to kettle corn.

Children rode burlap sacks down a large slide, scaled a rock climbing tower, got their faces painted, and played with play dough and blocks.

A brief heavy rain midway through the picnic drove most attendees under tents, but very few to their cars.

Percy King, a federal clerk for the Middle District in Jacksonville, was one of many students, attorneys, and judges who traveled from all over the state to the picnic. He returned after attending the event each year he was a law student at Florida A&M University.

“Just being able to walk around and talk to other people who had reached where I wanted to be already was a really, really good experience,” he said. “This year I wanted to come and basically give back what they’ve done for us.”

Julian Jackson-Fannin, a federal clerk for the Southern District, also returned after having attended as a FAMU law student.

“Every year it’s a wonderful experience,” he said. “I’m glad to see that it’s grown and more and more people are participating. I still think, particularly among federal clerks or even on the state level, diversity is needed desperately.”

Pettis echoed Jackson-Fannin’s sentiments.

“Diversity and inclusion is one of our objectives of the Bar,” Pettis said. “This is an effort that really accomplishes that. I think we need to make sure this entry-level connection between law student and Bar is not just on the front end but something that’s integrated throughout the practice of law, that we’re keeping people connected across all sectors. I think if we’re able to accomplish that, it’s a healthier Bar for us all.”

Amid the hustle and bustle of the event, Kozyak mused about how much it’s grown over the past decade.

“It makes me feel really proud because 10 years ago, my wife, partner, and I were cooking hamburgers and serving 200 people,” he said. “Now we’ve grown to 15 to 20 times that and have students coming in from everywhere.”

The picnic is designed to make two important goals easy: connecting law students with mentors and celebrating diversity.

“Students and young lawyers could not find a better place in the country to meet lawyers,” he said. “You

can walk up to a judge in a pair of shorts or a senior partner from Greenburg Traurig playing volleyball. You could never do that at a Bar event because they'd be surrounded by other senior lawyers and doing their own hustling."

Aside from a \$10 parking fee, attendees enjoy the festivities for free.

Among the dozens of sponsor tents, Kozyak pointed out the Florida Muslim Bar Association, the Caribbean Bar Association, and the Miami-Dade Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce.

"I hope everyone attending can see how valuable diversity is," he said. "This shows we can all get along and have fun. I hope everyone will be a little more sensitive and if you see someone from the Muslim Bar Association wearing traditional head garb, you don't go, 'Wow, that's weird,' and instead you go 'Wow, that's cool!'"

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