

Diversity Trailblazer Award recipient aims to give everyone a fair chance at success

By Christina Couto

Christopher S. Auguste not only is a strong believer that everyone should have a fair chance to succeed, regardless of income or race. He actually works to make it happen.

Because of his efforts promoting diversity in the legal profession and the community, Auguste will be honored with the 2016 Diversity Trailblazer Award at the State Bar's Annual Meeting in New York City. The award is presented by the State Bar's Committee on Diversity and Inclusion.

"Chris is a true trailblazer, devoting not only his time, but his heart, mind and soul to advancing diversity initiatives throughout New York," wrote Rabbi Bob Kaplan in nominating Auguste for the award. Kaplan is founding director of YouthBridge-NY, which brings New York City high school students together for diversity and leadership training.

"He is an unstoppable advocate for creating dialogue between those with inspiring lives and those looking to be inspired," Kaplan wrote.

Auguste, a partner at Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel LLP in New York City, understands firsthand how challenging it is as a minority or with a low-income background to succeed.

"I was there once," Auguste said.

Trinidad to Harlem

In 1970, Auguste arrived in Harlem from Trinidad with his mother and two of his six siblings. He attended the Wadleigh Secondary School, a public middle school in Harlem.

Recognizing Auguste's strong academic potential, school officials enrolled him in the Wadleigh Scholars Program, which helps minority students who demonstrate excellent academic potential in pursuing scholarships to preparatory schools throughout the country.

"Being in Harlem was fortuitous," Auguste said, explaining that, had the family moved to Brooklyn instead of Harlem, he never would have had the chance to participate in such a program.

After completing the program, he was accepted at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, a prestigious preparatory high school. He went on to earn his undergraduate degree, magna cum laude, from Harvard College and his law degree from Harvard Law School.

Although Auguste always knew he wanted to be a lawyer, he envisioned earning his law degree in the United States and then returning to Trinidad.

"Lawyers became the politicians who ran the country," he said. "My intent was to go back to Trinidad and become a politician."

Although he had a job offer in New York, Auguste returned to Trinidad to look for a job. When he learned that he had to wait nine months to take a foreign service test — which he hoped would lead to a political career — he decided to return to the United States and accept the job offer at Debevoise & Plimpton in New York City.



Christopher S. Auguste

Diversity advancement

Auguste, who joined Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel in 2005, focuses his practice on private placement or public offering of debt and equity securities, and is chair of Kramer Levin's Diversity Committee.

He sponsors an internal speaker series on minority issues, sponsors students of color at Fordham University, and guides second- and third-year associates — mostly minorities — through the firm's mentoring program.

Auguste, and the firm, encourages open dialogue on issues impacting women and minorities as well as the lesbian, gay, bisexual and the transgender community. Minority attorneys make up 11 percent of the firm,

while 38 percent are female lawyers, he said.

"Our aim is to make sure any associate who arrives has the equal chance to succeed at the firm — the right training, the right support," Auguste said.

"The aim at the end of the day is that each person feels he or she has the same chance of succeeding. We want to make sure that each associate can do well," he added.

Auguste also is a member of the firm's hiring committee, aiding recruitment efforts to increase the number of minority employees. The committee uses a variety of efforts, such as Sponsors for Educational Opportunity (SEO), a professional development initiative targeting talented Black, Hispanic, and Native American undergraduates and pre-law school candidates. He works with SEO interns one-on-one and participates in lunches with students throughout the summer.

Saturday morning tutoring

For the past 30 years, Auguste has spent Saturday mornings tutoring and mentoring students at Wadleigh — the same place he participated as a teen. The scholars program moved to Saturdays after some of its alumni, including Auguste, returned for a 25th reunion and saw that the program was struggling. Saturdays allowed alumni to take active roles in tutoring and mentoring students.

Auguste, who is now president of the program, has since helped nearly 300 students gain acceptance to some of the country's most elite boarding schools, including Lawrenceville, St. Paul's School and Hotchkiss, and elite colleges such as Barnard, Boston College and Princeton. Many of his students have gone on to careers in social work and in the banking and legal industries; some even returning to him as clients.

Auguste also is on the boards of YouthBridge-NY, where he has spear-headed several initiatives, and Goddard Riverside Community Center, which provides housing for senior citizens and the homeless, education centers for children, and college access and counseling for New York City high school students, among other services. ■

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