

BALSA

BALSA Celebrates 25th Anniversary

The spark of an idea created by a handful of black law students at NYU in the turbulent times of 1967 is today a voice for the African American community throughout this nation. In its short duration, the influence of the Black Allied Law Students Association (BALSA) has been felt by all sectors of the legal profession. Currently, there are more than 200 BALSA chapters, representing 6,500 law students throughout the United States, Puerto Rico, and Canada. To commemorate the 25th anniversary of the founding of the first BALSA chapter at NYU, the Law School has sponsored a series of events throughout the 1992-1993 academic year.

The Early Days

At a gala in February, the three

African American professors who were at NYU at the time of BALSA's founding — Haywood Burns, now dean of CUNY Law School; Leroy Clark, now a professor at Catholic University Law School; and Robert Carter, now a judge of the Southern District of New York — were celebrated. "These three men made a difference," noted A.J. Cooper ('69), a founder of BALSA. "They made us understand that we came to New York University for a legal education, not to be assimilated; that to be black was a blessing, not a burden."

Professor Howard Venable, new to NYU this year, recounted a story told to him by Robert Van Lierop ('67). Van Lierop was the only African American at the Law School in 1966, when he almost was expelled for leading discussions about the Vietnam War in Washington Square Park. Only the zealous advocacy of Professor Graham Hughes prevented his expulsion. Today, Van Lierop is the Ambassador to the United Nations from Vanuatu — the only American citizen to represent a foreign country at the U.N.

When the class of 1969 arrived, minority enrollment at the Law School



Special guests at the February gala: Dean Haywood Burns, A.J. Cooper '69, Lisa Davis '85, O. Peter Sherwood '71, Bob Holmes '69, Barry Robinson '70, Lisa Boykin '95, Fritz Alexander II '51, and Dr. William Seraille, nephew of Lucille Edwards Chance '32, the first black woman to graduate from NYU Law.

suddenly increased to 12 minority students in all, including Cooper and Robert Holmes ('69), also a founder of Balsa.

In describing how Balsa has been a "bridge over troubled waters for thousands of its members," Holmes directed a special message to some surprise guests at the gala — an eighth grade class from the Francis Scott Key Junior High School in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. He told them that the 1960s were "a turbulent time, but no more turbulent than today." Echoing Balsa's commitment to building an inclusive legal community, Holmes said, "in this period of so-called 'multiculturalism' learn from your friends...who are of all persuasions."

In his own remarkable career, Holmes has represented the likes of Andy Warhol, Marvin Gaye, The Jackson Five, The Sex Pistols, Stevie Wonder, and Diana Ross. He is currently the Executive Vice-President of the Music Group division of Sony-Columbia Pictures.

Current Struggles

In his keynote address, Cooper, the former mayor of Pritchard, Alabama (and the first African American mayor in the South), and now a partner at Ginsburg, Feldman & Bress in Washington, emphasized the



Robert Holmes of Sony-Columbia Pictures talks at the Balsa Roundtable about being a black executive in Hollywood.

need to recruit and retain African Americans in law school: "Over the past decade, enrollment in law schools increased by some 10 percent, and that of blacks increased only by one percent. Less than two percent of the some 50,000 lawyers employed by the 250 largest law firms are black. The percent of black partners is even more dismal." However, Cooper noted the commitment of Professor Graham Hughes who not only strongly supported Balsa at its inception, but also devised the Law School's first vigorous plan to recruit minority students.

Judge Carter, one of the architects of the legal battle that ended discrimination in this country, paid tribute to Justice Thurgood Marshall, to whose memory the Balsa Gala was dedicated. "Thurgood would have enjoyed all of the pomp and circumstance surrounding his funeral, but he would have been the first to point out that what was really important was making real the things he sought all of his life to bring about: the end of racial discrimination, in fact, and equal treatment for all of our people."

Balsa's Legacy

At a separate reception, Fritz Alexander II ('51), the Deputy Mayor of New York City and a former New York Court of Appeals judge, spoke about the continuing legacy of Balsa. The concept of equal justice for all, Alexander noted, still is not completely realized for

African Americans. He highlighted the many ways law both promotes and hinders social progress, citing its role during slavery, the civil rights movement, and the current era of judicial conservatism.

Balsa is relevant, Alexander emphasized, because the struggle continues. "As you fight for acceptance in the mainstream," he added, "you have an obligation to remember the struggles of those before you and to advance further." Urging the audience to "never to succumb to the illusion of inclusion," he warned that "racism is still alive and well."

I am of a generation that was brought into a world tainted with racial conflict, tempered by war and seasoned with hatred. I am of a generation that came to age with the civil rights struggle of Dr. Martin Luther King — turned in anger and frustration to Rap Brown's cry of "Black Power;" watched while all of our heroes were killed, all our hopes destroyed, but a generation that can still say with one voice, "if you are not free, then I am not free."

A.J. Cooper '69



Judge Robert L. Carter pays tribute to his life-long friend Justice Thurgood Marshall at gala.

Other Balsa commemoration events included a series of Dean's Roundtables and a symposium on race theories.