

Group works to make legal community more diverse



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(Photo: The Enquirer/Amanda Rossmann)

- **Program works to expose minorities to careers in law. SWEL has helped more than 500 high school and college students.**

- For 26 years, a small organization on a shoestring budget has been making a big difference in the lives of young minorities who are interested in becoming lawyers. SWEL – which stands for Summer Work Experience in Law – is dedicated to diversifying the legal community by opening doors for promising African-American students. [According to a May report in The American Lawyer](#), 3 percent of lawyers at 223 of the nation's biggest law firms – and 1.9 percent of the partners – are African-American. SWEL is also about helping its students build foundations for life even if they don't become lawyers. It launched the 2014 summer session on Friday, and over the next three months 32 students will mix with legal powerhouses like federal judges Susan Diott and Walter Rice, and lawyers from top firms and corporations across the region. They'll participate in writing, ethics and leadership workshops; learn about financial planning; and tour Paul Brown Stadium while talking with sports agents. They'll also spend time at seven law schools in Ohio and Michigan during a three-day trip in July. To date, SWEL has worked with more than 500 high school and college students. In addition to the summer workshops, SWEL helps its students find summer internships at law firms, companies and in public offices across the region, and subsidizes those jobs when needed. It's all done on a budget of approximately \$105,000-\$110,000. More than 70 SWEL students have become lawyers, but that's just one part of the mission, says Kenneth Parker, an assistant U.S. attorney for the Southern District of Ohio who chairs SWEL's board. "The goal is to create leaders first."

- **Jim Johnson got program off the ground**

- SWEL is the brainchild of Jim Johnson, a Cincinnati native who grew up in the West End projects and is a Walnut Hills High School and University of Cincinnati graduate. Johnson worked a variety of jobs after college before enrolling and graduating from UC's law school in 1980. He spent the next 25 years working for the City of Cincinnati, including serving as a senior city solicitor. In the mid-80s, Johnson said a push started in the public and private sectors to expand the pool of minority lawyers. SWEL started in 1988 as a pilot program of the Black Lawyers Association of Cincinnati-Cincinnati Bar Association Round Table, and Johnson directed the effort in his free time. Johnson said it was an opportunity for him to pay back people who helped him as a young student: A woman at church who nominated him for a scholarship even though he barely knew her. A teacher who got him symphony tickets and expanded his cultural horizons. It was also a chance to leverage his personal experiences. Johnson took the SAT and LSAT without studying. He never knew preparation courses were available. Experience and access are a powerful combination. "I don't think I ever doubted that taking on kids, helping them to explore the world and their options, helping talk to somebody about what they wanted to do ... I never had any doubt that would make a difference," said Johnson, who today supervises seven attorneys at the Hamilton County Juvenile Court Division.

- **'You don't want them to give up'**

- Parker knew in high school that he wanted to become a lawyer, and met Johnson while attending Tuskegee University. Johnson became Parker's mentor and helped him navigate through law school and into a successful career. Parker has led his office's Criminal Division since 2011, and was chief of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force for two years. SWEL supporters like Bill Keating Jr., a partner at Keating Muething & Klekamp PLL, marvel at the hours Johnson and Parker have put into SWEL given their day (and night) jobs. They provide instant credibility to SWEL students, Keating said. "When the Jim Johnsons and Ken Parkers sit down with these kids and say, 'You can get there. I got there, and here's how you do it,' it sends a more effective message than if I'm the one telling them," Keating said. Parker ultimately wants to expand SWEL throughout Ohio, and said the board would consider hiring a director with adequate funding. In the meantime, Parker will continue coordinating the program during the summer, and taking calls at all hours during

the school year from SWEL's students seeking advice. "A lot of these students are the first ones going to law school in their family. Some are the first going to college. A lot will come and say, 'I know where I would like to be, but I just don't know how to get there,' " Parker said. "There's a long road of potential disenchantment and frustration between where they are and where they're going, and you don't want them to give up."

- **TO GET INVOLVED**

To learn more about SWEL and to get involved as a volunteer or donor, go to <http://www.swel.org/>