



# aboutface

By Shannon Strybel

*California Western School of Law* remains a leader among institutes of higher education in training ethical, competent, and compassionate lawyers who represent our diverse society. In just over a decade, the law school more than quadrupled its percentage of students coming from ethnically and socio-economically diverse backgrounds. As the nation celebrates the election of an African-American to the presidency, we celebrate the work of California Western's Diversity Initiative in broadening the diversity of the law school and the legal profession.

Barack Obama made history on January 20 when he became the 44th president of the United States and became the first African-American to assume the Oval Office.

Closer to home, Jerrilyn Malana '98 became the first Asian-American to be sworn in as President of the San Diego County Bar Association, and three women of diverse backgrounds ascended to positions on the Bar: Tina Fryar '97 and Marcella O. McLaughlin '98 were appointed to the Board of Directors, and Farzeen Essa '06, was appointed to the Young and New Lawyers Division Board

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of Directors. In addition, the law school’s Student Bar Association is led by Jose Orozco, an enterprising and intrepid young man expected to graduate in June 2009.

These accomplishments mirror the objectives of California Western’s Diversity Initiative, begun in the 1990s to respond to the needs of students and the legal profession. At that time, minorities represented less than 10 percent of the law school’s enrollment.

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In 2008, minority students represented 39 percent of the entering class at California Western. This should help boost the current rate of minority representation among legal professionals in the United States, currently at 13 percent. In California, 53 percent of the population consists of people of color, but only 17 percent of California attorneys are persons of color. Clearly there is a disparity that needs to be addressed.

The law school makes a concerted effort to maintain a diverse faculty and staff to support the students and to create a welcoming environment, says Marion Cloete, Associate Director for Diversity Services.

“Throughout the legal profession, things are changing fairly slowly,” says Cloete. “But diversity is on the table in legal education and the legal profession—from reaching out to diverse students from kindergarten through college, to the process of judicial appointment by the state—so that gives us optimism.

“We want to be representative of the society we live in, taking into account ethnic, gender, geographic, social, and economic backgrounds. We take an integrated approach here and everyone is working towards diversity,” she adds.

As a woman and what she character-

izes as “multi-ethnic,” Fryar certainly fulfills that goal. The 36-year-old laughs when asked about her ethnic background. “*The Reader’s Digest* version is my mother is from the Philippines, and my dad, who is from North Carolina, is African-American, German, and Cherokee Indian.”

Fryar co-founded one of the few women-owned, minority-owned employment law firms in San Diego, Park Fryar LLP, 18 months ago, capping an inspiring career committed to advancing gender, racial, and ethnic diversity in the legal profession. In addition to being a member of the SDCBA’s board, Fryar extends her civic duties to other San Diego organizations, from the Pan Asian Lawyers of San Diego (PALSD) and the International Visitors Council of San Diego to the Earl B. Gilliam Bar Association and the Filipino American Lawyers of San Diego. During her tenure as president of PALSD, she received the State Bar of California’s Wiley W. Manuel Award for Pro Bono Legal Services. Clearly, this is a woman who yields a legal sword to ensure the scales of justice are balanced.

“In the past, the rule of law was sometimes used as an instrument of oppression—for example, to preclude interracial marriage and integrated schools,” she says of her choice of law as a profession. “But it has also—and can continue to be—used as a catalyst for change. I think as attorneys, what we all hope to achieve through the practice of law is the implementation of positive change within our communities.”

Fryar first picked up her sword of equality and justice at California Western, which she selected because of the high quality of its academic program, and the faculty and staff’s commitment to the students.

“When I toured the school, the faculty and staff were welcoming and

made it very clear that they were dedicated to supporting students in the achievement of their academic goals.”

Fryar used her time at law school well—winning awards and assuming leadership positions in the Student Bar Association. She co-founded the Diversity Coalition, which facilitates the exchange of resources, expertise, and opportunities among alumni, and acted as a Student Trial Advocate in the Association of Trial Lawyers of America’s Moot Court program.

Essa, 29, is another powerhouse graduate who sharpened her legal skills at California Western. In the three years since her graduation, she went on to become a passionate advocate of human rights and “the right to be treated fairly and with dignity regardless of one’s life circumstances.”

Essa was drawn to California Western in part because of its variety of programs—in particular the California Innocence Project (CIP), a nationally renowned program dedicated to the release of wrongfully convicted inmates.

Essa, currently an associate at Brown Law Group, became a CIP student during her second year and wrote motions, interviewed witnesses, examined evidence, and assisted in investigations.

“It was a wonderful experience, and I hope I played a small role in making a difference in a person’s life,” says Essa, who graduated at the top 5 percent of her class, *magna cum laude*, in 2006.

While attending law school, she received numerous awards, and participated in Law Review, Lawyers’ Club, and the South Asian Law Students Association. Soon after graduation, she and eight other women formed the Girls Think Tank, an award-winning grass roots organization dedicated to such issues as homelessness, trafficking of women, and gang violence. At Brown,



Left to right: Marcella McLaughlin '98, Jerrilyn Malana '98, Farzeen Essa '06, and Tina Fryar '97.

Essa focuses on business litigation with an emphasis on employment law.

Malana, 45, who graduated California Western *magna cum laude* in two-and-a-half years, has always viewed diversity as a core cultural value. As president of the SDCBA, she feels a special commitment to increase diversity in the legal profession. She chaired the association's Diversity Outreach Initiative for the past two years, and is active with its Ethnic Relations & Diversity Committee. At Littler Mendelson, where she is a shareholder, Malana served as Co-Chair of the National Diversity Council. She also worked with California Western's Alumni Diversity Coalition, which she maintains serves an important role in increasing diversity in the profession.

"The increased focus on diversity is critical—and timely," she says. "The fabric of our country was built on diversity, and it remains the strength of our nation."

Orozco, 28, plans to work as a public

defender when he graduates from California Western, helping people slice through reams of legalistic red tape to turn their lives around and become productive citizens.

"I want to help people entering the system," says Orozco, whose parents died when he was young, leading him to eventually settle with his aunt in Sherman Heights. "Everything counts for these people, to help them keep fighting and move on with their lives."

The student body president knows whereof he speaks. His path to law school was non-traditional, to say the least. A high school drop-out and an undocumented immigrant, Orozco was on the path to nowhere when he met former policeman Kevin LaChapelle. LaChapelle helped him trade in a potential switchblade for a legal sword. When they met, Orozco was on a tagging crew and was close to joining one of the gangs patrolling his neighborhood in Logan Heights.



Student Bar President Jose Orozco '09.

Now a U.S. citizen, Orozco chose to attend California Western in part because of the diverse population.

"When I visited, I noticed that they were choosing students from diverse backgrounds," he says. "I got to know different people, including the faculty, some of whom have practiced for years. It seemed like a good fit."

As president of the Student Bar Association, he hopes to make some positive changes in the school and in the community by increasing community service for the law students. "I want the students to recognize that they can make a difference," says Orozco.

With students and graduates such as Orozco and Essa as ambassadors, California Western continues to broaden the perspective and diversity of the legal profession and form graduates who will make significant, measurable contributions to our community, our society, and our world. ♦