

BERTRAND "RANDY" THOMAS PARTNERING FOR THE FUTURE STUDENT PROJECT AND THE BLACK HISTORY MONTH STUDENT CHALLENGE*

The mission of the Legal Services Corporation is *to promote equal access to justice in our Nation and to provide high-quality civil legal assistance to low-income persons*. Achieving our goal requires increasing the public's awareness of legal rights, remedies and organizations that are available to provide legal assistance. Black History Month is an opportunity to promote that goal.

On February 7, 1926, Dr. Carter G. Woodson organized Negro History Week, which was expanded in the 1960's to Black History Month. He believed that "Those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history." Dr. Woodson believed Blacks should be proud of their heritage and other Americans should also understand it.

The Legal Services Corporation has embraced this challenge, annually sponsoring events that afford staff the opportunity to broaden their awareness and appreciation of the contributions of Blacks in America.

LSC's Black History Month observance includes the "Bertrand 'Randy' Thomas Partnering for the Future" student project, which focuses on creating opportunities to encourage, strengthen and inspire young people who may feel that success is beyond their reach. The project has afforded LSC the opportunity to model leadership and mentoring development in the community. LSC staff have made panel presentations that focused on career and life-building skills at participating schools.

Since 2006, LSC has partnered with several local schools in D.C. and Maryland through student participation in the LSC Black History Month student challenge. This year, we are pleased to have requested participation from students at Ballou Stay High School, Ballou High School, Luke C. Moore Academy, and César Chávez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy, in Washington, DC, and Annapolis Road Academy Alternative High School in Maryland. Other schools that have participated in previous years include Thomas Johnson Middle School in Lanham, Maryland, and Perry Street Preparatory Public Charter School in Washington, DC. This year's challenge theme is "African American in Times of War. Students are requested to submit entries in one of the following categories: essay, short story, poem, art, video, and photography. The top three entries are selected for recognition by LSC.

*Bertrand "Randy" Thomas served as one of the founding members of the Partnering for the Future Project and was an integral part of efforts to reach out to students and encourage them to push through their struggles and achieve. Randy desired to touch the lives of students, and he was willing to dig deep and share some of the personal difficulties he faced on his road to a successful life and career. Randy served as Program Counsel in the LSC Office of Compliance and Enforcement until his passing on January 8, 2017.

The students, their parents, and school representatives are invited to attend the LSC Black History Month Program and one student is selected to make an oral presentation on their submission. In addition, students attending the LSC Black History Month program have had the opportunity to meet prominent African Americans who participated as speakers. Past keynote speakers include: Congressman John Lewis, former Congressman Artur Davis, former Congressman John Conyers, Maryland Chief Judge Robert Bell, former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, Harvard Law School Professor Charles Ogletree, NAACP General Counsel Kim Keenan, Children's Defense Fund Founder and Founder Marian Wright Edelman and Bertie Bowman, author and the longest-serving African-American staff member on Capitol Hill.

The "Bertrand 'Randy' Thomas Partnering for the Future" project has a positive impact on the students involved by allowing them to envision greater possibilities for their lives, and it has been a wonderful opportunity for the LSC staff to give back to the community that it serves.