

Rodney Mitchell, Phoenix: Moving Ahead
By SALLY MARKS McKEE
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Some people shrug and ask, “Why?” Rodney Mitchell asks, “Why not?” and moves ahead.

This optimistic attitude paid off when the second-year law student recently learned he was the recipient of the first annual Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship from the Hayzel B. Daniels Bar Association, an all-Arizona group of African American attorneys and jurists. The annual scholarship is awarded to an African American law student who has demonstrated academic excellence and is involved in community service.

“One of my fellow students told me she hadn’t bothered to apply because she knew it would be very competitive,” said Rodney. “Because we have the Gohonzon, my wife and I have always felt that obstacles were opportunities, and it never occurred to me NOT to apply.”

Rodney’s wife, Elise, said: “There have been many challenging moments since Rodney made the commitment to attend law school and I made the commitment to support him in this joint decision. We knew it would be an incredible struggle with many sacrifices. When situations have arisen that seemed insurmountable, Rodney has always consoled me in the same way, saying with conviction in his voice and strength and compassion in his eyes, ‘We have the Gohonzon!’”

In addition to school, work and his active role as the group leader of Ahwatukee Group in Ahwatukee, a suburb of Phoenix, Rodney has expended considerable pro bono work within the minority community. He is the assistant project director of the Homeless Legal Assistance Project and spends about 10 to 15 hours each week coordinating and providing legal assistance to the residents of three homeless shelters. He was also recently elected by the HLAP board of directors to be project director during 1997–98.

As a board member of the Black Law Students Association, he participates in that organization’s “Street Law” program, providing legal education to middle and high school students, primarily in minority schools. This year Rodney helped start the “Street Law” program at a local inner-city school where there is a high rate of violence. “The more we help our children to understand the spirit and intent of our laws, the more motivated they will be to uphold them,” Rodney said.

Receiving the \$1,000 scholarship was a victory for the Mitchell family, which includes Rodney’s wife, Elise, and three sons, Joshua, 12, Rodney Jr., 5, and Cheyenne, 3. But meeting the banquet’s keynote speaker, Martin Luther King III, was the day’s highlight.

“When we were notified that Rodney would be the scholarship recipient, we were ecstatic, but when we found out that he would be presented the scholarship at an awards banquet with Martin Luther King III as the guest speaker, it made the other benefits of this event pale in comparison,” Elise said. “To think that we would be meeting a man who positively impacts society in so many ways was almost overwhelming. He is a man who is carrying on his father’s dream, the son of a man who changed history.”

Mr. King’s philosophy strongly mirrors the SGI’s commitment to respect human life, peace and equality. “There are so many similarities about the message that Martin Luther King III is trying to send and the philosophy of the SGI that at times I felt like I was listening to SGI President Ikeda speak,” Elise said.

Mr. King urged his listeners to “get beyond” the issue of color.

“As he spoke, it reminded me of the cherry, plum, peach and damson blossoms part of the ‘Orally Transmitted Teachings,’ which speaks of mutual understanding and appreciation of one another’s differences, thus creating a lush garden of many blossoms,”

Rodney said.

“It was good to hear the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream being reborn in the passion of his son,” he continued. “Mr. King also believes that we need to continue to move forward — not look at the past but learn from it, continuing to advance toward unselfish love and the unity of diverse cultures. Buddhism expresses this as the true cause; from this moment on, making a fresh departure from the prime point.”

Rodney went on to say: “Mr. King quoted from his father’s essay ‘The Dimensions of a Perfect Life,’ saying, ‘Whatever work you do in life, even if you’re a street sweeper, do your job so well that no one living or dead could do it better.’ As I heard this, I laughed to myself, thinking, ‘Gee, where have I heard this advice before?’”

During the banquet, Rodney gave his experience of being a shy student in a newly integrated elementary school in Bakersfield, Calif. Although they didn’t know each other personally, Rodney was living the same way that was taught to the King family — working in harmony with children of all colors and backgrounds.

Rodney told how, despite being one of only a handful of non-white students at his grade school, he was determined to make friends. What better way to do this than to run for a student body officer position? His mother helped him write a speech, and he went from being an outsider to the president of Franklin Elementary School. He won by a landslide.

During his scholarship acceptance speech, Rodney thanked his mother, his fellow law students and his wife, whom he met while they were both in the fifth grade at Franklin Elementary School. “She voted for me for school president in the sixth grade, and she has voted for me ever since,” Rodney said.

After graduating from law school, Rodney plans to continue to help others, particularly those in need. In his cover letter to the selection committee for the scholarship, he wrote:

I genuinely like and care for people. I fully intend to use my legal skills in ensuring that people in my environment are cared for legally. Whether as a prosecutor, public defender, civil rights litigator or a member of the legislature, I plan on impacting the well-being of the citizens of Arizona as positively as possible.

Rodney’s mother, Earlie Mae Mitchell, has her own ideas. When Rodney was a little boy she told him he would be president of the United States one day.

It isn’t hard for the many people who know Rodney — including “street people,” SGI members, law students, lawyers, and now even dignitaries such as Martin Luther King III — to consider Earlie Mae Mitchell’s suggestion and ask, “Why not?”

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