MEET ELIJAH FAGAN-SOLIS: WINNER OF THE 2008 DAVID A. GARFINKEL ESSAY CONTEST

At 21, Elijah Fagan-Solis seems wise beyond his years. Perhaps that’s because this Hudson Valley Community College student learned early on not to take anything for granted, having been diagnosed with kidney failure as a high school freshman.

On May 5, 2008—upon being honored at the Court of Appeals Law Day ceremony for his award-winning entry in the David A. Garfinkel essay contest sponsored by the New York state courts’ historical society—Elijah marked another milestone, the three-year anniversary of his kidney transplant. “I visit children in dialysis, bring them gifts. Many of them get discouraged. As someone who has overcome a lot, I want them to know their dreams don’t have to be limited by chronic disease,” says the incoming sophomore and aspiring lawyer.

Elijah has expanded his own dreams over the past year, deciding to pursue a legal career once members of the Hudson Valley Community College faculty and administration helped him realize how much potential he has. In fact, it was one of Elijah’s professors, Kathryn Sullivan, who encouraged him to participate in the essay contest.

The contest, open to students enrolled in community colleges in New York, asked participants to submit an essay titled “The Courts and Human Rights in New York: The Legacy of the Lemmon Slave Case,” examining the history and impact of this celebrated 19th-century case.

At the initial hearing in the Lemmon case in 1852, the New York Supreme Court held that “the holding of slaves in this state, for any purpose is as injurious to our condition and to the public peace, as it is opposed to the sentiment of the people of this state.”

Essays Focus on Wider Impact of Case

In their essays, students were asked to focus on several issues, including the wider implications of the Lemmon case for the nation and ways that our modern-day courts protect human rights in New York.

In his first-prize entry, the young Mr. Fagan-Solis writes, “The Lemmon Slave Case was a pivotal decision that established human rights long awaited by slaves. New York’s quest for human rights did not stop there, as New York continued its advocacy through the twentieth century and still protects human rights today. New York has the proud distinction of being the first state to enact a Human Rights Law. In it, every citizen, whether male or female, black or white, is afforded ‘an equal opportunity to enjoy a full and productive life.’ The Legislature created the New York State Division of Human Rights to enforce the Human Rights Law and to ensure that ‘every individual ... is afforded an equal opportunity to participate fully in the economic, cultural and intellectual life of the state.’”

While Elijah already had what he calls “a good base” in law-related issues, he says he never realized that New York was such “a front-runner for human rights” until he began the research for his essay.

Essay Winner Shares Vision of His Future

After being named the winner, the future attorney was invited on a tour of the Court of Appeals by the chief judge. “I was scared to meet her,” he admits, adding that Judge Kaye instantly made him feel comfortable, extending her congratulations and letting Elijah know how proud she was of his outstanding work.

These days, Elijah is considering a public service career, setting his sights on the political arena. “I’d like to do something on a national scale,” he says, the Albany County native’s shy smile giving away his modesty.

To learn more about the Lemmon slave case, visit www.courts.state.ny.us/history/lemmon.htm

For the full text of Elijah Fagan-Solis’s first-prize essay, visit The Historical Society of the Courts of the State of New York online at www.nycourts.gov/history.

The contest, open to students enrolled in New York’s community colleges, asked participants to submit an essay on the celebrated Lemmon slave case—a legal effort to free slaves brought from Virginia to New York, where slavery was illegal.

(Jury Pool News, Summer 2008)