John Caher: Welcome to “Amici,” News and Insight from the New York Judiciary and Unified Court System.

Today our guest is the Honorable Juanita Bing Newton, Dean of the New York State Judicial Institute in White Plains. Our topic today is a New York Legal Opportunity Program, or N-Y-L-E-O, an extraordinary program offered by the Judicial Institute to promote academic success for individuals historically underrepresented in the legal profession.

John Caher: Thank you for speaking with us today, Judge. First, what exactly is the LEO program and when was it established?

Judge Newton: Well, the LEO program is an intense six week educational training program for New Yorkers who have just graduated from college and are on their way to law school. It's a program by and for New York residents and citizens who are planning to attend at one of the 15 New York state law schools.

Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye established the program, which is officially the “New York Legal Education Opportunity Program,” and her stated purpose was to help ensure a diverse legal community by promoting academic success for individuals historically underrepresented in the legal profession. So, that’s the official answer.

But I look at LEO in a little different way, saying to myself, “I wish I had this program 40 some odd years ago when as a young African American woman I entered the law school class completely unaware and in many respects unprepared.” It's a brief preparatory program for people who have not otherwise in their lives been exposed to law or the life of lawyers. It's almost like a head start for young people and even older adults people going to law school.

John Caher: So some people who get into law school have the aptitude to get in, obviously, but are still ill-prepared to succeed because certain things are missing from their prior education, is that right?

Judge Newton: I think it's more they were unprepared because they've never walked through that door before. The law is radically different from the way it's portrayed in popular culture. Many of our LEO students want to go into law because they want to do some good. But most of them are first- timers in their family to go into the professional life of the law. Sometimes you walk into a new area and you immediately are behind the eight ball because you don't know what to expect. You don't know how to brief a case. You've never read a case before. You don't know the language of the law or the protocol of the law. So it's just really an opportunity to expose people, who are not otherwise exposed, to what it's going to be like in law school.

I can recall saying to myself a week into law school, these many years ago, that I just never expected this. No one told me about this. I was a decent, actually a pretty good college student, and yet law school and college, the way of studying, the way of learning, the way of teaching, were very different. So the LEO program provides exposure for the classroom to the students but it's also a program that attempts to explain the life of the law to people who've never been exposed to it. They don't have fathers or uncles or cousins and aunts, mothers who are lawyers, so they may not know what it means to be a member of the bar.
They may not know the ethical rules and obligations of a lawyer.

We try in this program to expose them to the life of the law by several things. We have programs that are hosted by law firms, by bar associations, by judicial associations to meet and talk with them and answer the questions of the students. We take them on trips to the Court of Appeals, to specialty courts, to the Red Hook Community Court, to domestic violence courts, to Commercial Decision courts to see what it's like, to see the litigation side of the law.

John Caher: Let's back up a second. What are the eligibility requirements?

Judge Newton: Well, you have to be a New Yorker and you have to be a college graduate by June of this year, and you have to be either admitted to a New York State law school or wait-listed to a New York State law school.

John Caher: Now is this a full-time program?

Judge Newton: It is a six week program and it is a full-time program. It's held at the Judicial Institute, which is on the campus of Pace University School of Law in White Plains. The LEOs, as we like to call them, stay on campus in the dormitory for that six week program. They receive their education classes here at the Judicial Institute. They are taught by professors who are fully tenured professors at one or more of the New York State law schools. They study together at the library here on campus. They have, as I said, faculty members who are tenured professors in law so they understand the internal workings of law schools and trainings but they're also given teaching assistants who will help them any hour of the day to get through their programs, which as I said before, is quite rigorous.

John Caher: You started to get into the details of what goes on during those six weeks. Could you expand on that? Is it just one long series of lectures or just something else?

Judge Newton: No it's not. The courses are obviously designed to be courses that are typical of first year law school courses, such as contracts or criminal law, civil procedure and so they're lectured there, they're challenging in the law school pedagogy. But we also have intense legal research and writing which is also a challenge for new law school students. They learn the details of how to use the various, electronic now, research tools. They have intense writing responsibilities that they must undertake and of course they're tested throughout this program by

their professors. But we also want them to get to know lawyers and a lawyer's life experience. So we have a weekly field trip over the six weeks.

In the past we've taken them to every level of court, from the appellate courts to the trial courts, to the state courts and the federal courts. We've taken them to specialty courts such as Domestic Violence courts, Commercial Division courts, the criminal courts, the civil courts and of course Family Court. Many of the students have an interest in immigration. Quite a few of our students were immigrants or from families of recent immigrants, and so there's a lot of interest in immigration law. So we take them to that kind of court so that they can see the law in action, as I like to say. We introduce them to the jury system and let them see the whole process of jury selection and its constitutional parameters. We take them out into the world of law, both in the courtroom and with the professors.

John Caher: Is it successful? Does it work? Does it help them?

Judge Newton: Well, we, unfortunately we started in 2007 and we were not funded since 2011 because of the budget restrictions of recent years, so we haven't been able to keep up with all of the graduates. But we have a wonderful story of one of our graduates who we know is successful. You might ask, “Where did we get the money for this year?”

John Caher: I was about to.

Judge Newton: And we got the money through a member item from the New York State Assembly. Assemblywoman Latoya Joyner was elected from her Bronx district in November 2014, took her seat in January 2015, and one of the first things she did was to achieve a $200,000 grant for the LEO program because she herself was a LEO graduate in 2009.

John Caher: Oh really, that's fascinating, that's a great story.

Judge Newton: Isn’t that a wonderful pay it forward story? Assemblywoman became a court attorney to one of our newly elected judges a couple of years ago and she always says that her success in law school can be directly pinpointed towards the LEO program. When others would say with astonishment, “How do you know that?” “How do you have this confidence?” “How do you know how to do that?” She would say it was LEO, so when she had an opportunity she convinced her colleagues in the Assembly to approve this grant and that is how we're restarting the LEO program here 2016 because of the support, encouragement and financing from the Assembly led in this instance by our LEO fellow graduate, Assemblywoman Latoya Joyner.

John Caher: Good for her. Now I think you mentioned she got you $200,000?

Judge Newton: Yes.

John Caher: Does that cover the full amount or are there other funding streams as well? Or is there tuition?

Judge Newton: Well no, the program is free. It's 100 percent free and we have a budget and it's been approved and it barely covers all of our costs, but it does cover our costs. We are, quite frankly, looking into whether or not some of our programs and receptions will be sponsored by those who are receiving us. We're hopeful that we'll get it done. This is not a filet mignon and caviar program. This is more like a pizza program, so it's not expensive. But we will be very cautious to not overspend because we don't really have any money to overspend.

John Caher: Is it a pizza party or a boot camp? I notice that they're required to live on campus.

Judge Newton: Well, I wouldn't call it a boot camp but I would call it realistic. Many students when they walk into law school and they're there for a few days, a few weeks, they're almost in shell shock that they were so unprepared for the rigorous, the very highly rigorous nature of law school. The LEOs will not be shell shocked. They will be prepared. If that's what a boot camp does, it's a boot camp, but it is definitely a very rigorous program.

We expect them to be in class from early in the morning until mid-afternoon and then they're required to engage in after class studies, special legal writing clinics, meeting with faculty members. Classes are very small, the groups are very small, so they have that individual personal attention. It is not a summer trip up to the country to lounge around. It is a rigorous program.

John Caher: How many students participate annually?

Judge Newton: In the past, it's been anywhere from 20 to 25 and we're looking to stay in that area of numbers, within 20 to 25.

John Caher: And if someone is interested, how can they apply for this summer, or is the window of opportunity still available for them?

Judge Newton: The window of opportunity is still available. We will probably take applications through March, or maybe even after. We won't close the door if we have space. We've learned in some past programs and some of the people who are targeted— minorities, financially disadvantaged, immigrants—often don't think of law school as a possibility until later than others who know that this is there on that trajectory to be lawyers no matter what.

We want to accommodate, so I guess we would take—and I hope my staff doesn't yell at me for saying this—but I guess we would take applications up until the time that we begin the program, which will start this year on June 6. It's not likely you could apply in May and expect to get in, but we will take applications

until every seat is taken. We hope that will be done by April 1st, that we will have our full component of participants by April 1st. The application for the LEO program can be found on the website for the Unified Court System, the New York State Court System. Specifically, it's www.nycourts.gov/attorneys/LEO.

John Caher: Okay, great, great, and that's the best place to go for more information?

Judge Newton: Yes, on that page you will have information about it, you have application information, program information and a link to the actual application to be submitted to us here. If they have any questions, they can always call us here at the Judicial Institute. Our number is 914-824-5800.

John Caher: Terrific, it sounds like a wonderful program and really not that expensive.

Judge Newton: I think we maximize our use of the money. We're grateful to Assemblywoman Joyner and the Assembly for giving us this money and we're hoping that next year we'll be able to get that money and maybe the court budget will have corrected itself and have additional money and be able to accommodate even more students, because it has proven to be very helpful for those who participated.

We're also hoping to, with the leadership and volunteer of Assemblywoman Joyner, we're hoping to create a LEO alumni group. We hope they will also be mentors and sponsors of these young people.

John Caher: What a wonderful idea. Is there anything you want to add or something I forgot to ask about?

Judge Newton: The one thing I did forget to say is we give each of the LEOs, upon their graduation and enter into the law school world, a judicial mentor—a judge who will be a friend, a mentor, an advisor through the entire law school experience for the LEO graduate. That's something that we're also very pleased about and has been a successful aspect of the program.

John Caher: Thank you for your time Judge, I appreciate it.

Judge Newton: Thank you John, it's always a pleasure.

John Caher: Thank you for listening to this edition of Amici. If you have a suggestion for a topic on Amici, call John Caher at 518-453-8669 or send him a note at jcaher@nycourts.gov. In the meantime, stay tuned.