

Fordham Law News

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George Olsen '85

| Scholarship Founder George Olsen '85 Honored by Fordham Law School for "Opening Doors" for Students

BY ERIN DEGREGORIO ON APRIL 17, 2024

ALUMNI, LAW SCHOOL NEWS

George Olsen '85 didn't begin his legal education until his late 30s. His Fordham Law education became the launching pad for a successful career in real estate, instilling in him a deep appreciation for his alma mater and inspiring him to give back decades later.

"I'm of the age where a lot of kids didn't go to college and, when I started law school, people said you're going to be 40 years old when you graduate," Olsen said. "I remember saying, 'Either I'm going to be 40 and an attorney or I'm going to be 40 and not an attorney. I'd rather be 40 and an attorney.'"

After serving in the Vietnam War with the Marine Corps, Olsen earned his master's degree from Cal State Fullerton and graduated from Fordham Law School's evening program in the mid-1980s. He has been a real estate attorney in New York City for over 35 years and serves as the co-founder and managing principal of the New York City Regional Center.

Olsen said that, like many students today, he needed to take out a loan in order to pay for his last semester. He recalled how instrumental that avenue of financial assistance made a difference in completing his J.D., inspiring him to pay it forward for future students. Olsen founded two scholarship funds that have provided essential support for

students to pursue a Fordham Law education and launch their careers in the legal profession—the Barth-Olsen Diversity Scholarship Fund and the Olsen Scholars Program.

"I have this belief that we always run into doors in our life—a lot of them are locked, some of them you have to knock on, some of them open for you, or sometimes you just can't get in," Olsen said. "And I always think you have to figure out a way to get those doors opened, no matter what."

He added, "I remember a Fordham Law student telling me one time, 'My nieces and nephews asked me what a lawyer does,' because they didn't even know what a lawyer was. It dawned on me that the door is open [through that law student] and all of those little kids are going to run through that door [one day] because somebody opened it."

To date, Olsen's philanthropy has shaped the lives of 12 students, including Roberto Leito '26, the current Barth-Olsen Diversity Scholarship recipient. Leito called his connection with Olsen "fortuitous" given their similar paths as evening students, their work with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and their shared interest in real estate law. The two met last summer and regularly check in and chat with one another.



(L-R) George Olsen '85 and Roberto Leito '26

"I see and feel doors opening for me now because of George's generosity and mentorship and my own personal commitment," he said. "And being a first-generation law student like George, I empathize with the door analogy."

Leito added, "I've already tried to open doors not only for myself, but for others in similar positions as well; but now, having heard more from George at the event, I'm ever more confident that I will commit myself to opening doors for others for my whole career as an attorney."

Olsen said he views his philanthropy as "multi-generational" and hopes that the students he has helped, as well as future students, also give back once they are settled in their careers. "Open new doors for people. It doesn't have to be money. It can be just time and energy," he said. "Help your little cousins or other kids in your family, take them to your office with you, and pass along your knowledge."

He added, "Don't get lost in the everyday struggles that everybody faces. Try to lift your head up once in a while and look around and say, 'Ok, is there someplace for me to lend a hand somewhere?'"

Olsen was recognized for his philanthropy by Dean Matthew Diller at the Law School's annual Scholarship Benefactors Reception held in early April. At the event, Diller spoke of the promise and potential in the next generation of Fordham lawyers and thanked Olsen and the other donors in attendance for making Fordham Law accessible to students who might not otherwise be able to afford to attend.

"George has truly exemplified the Fordham motto, 'In the service of others,'" Diller said before the crowded room. "Getting to know you and working with you as dean has been a fantastic pleasure for me. I've learned a tremendous amount from you and your outlook on life."

Dozens of students met and reconnected with the donors behind their scholarships at this year's reception. Donors also got to see the impact of their investment in the Law School and directly hear from those whose lives have been changed for the better by their gifts.



(L-R) George Olsen '85 and Dean Matthew Diller