

TOUR OF DUTY: GM counsel helps school with vehicle

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"Within two weeks, we had heard from over 300 veterans. We heard from veterans from all eras and all wars; veterans with all kinds of disabilities and all kinds of stories. But what we have heard the most is the extent of the need and the level of gratitude that the veterans we help express," Gordon said.

"Now, the truth is that it is really we who should be offering our gratitude to them. And that's why we started thinking long and hard about how to expand our efforts. Chris Johnson at General Motors stepped forward to achieve the impossible—getting GM to donate a new custom-designed, state-of-the-art second Mobile Law Office that will enable us to supplement our efforts in Michigan with efforts beyond."

Johnson graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1973 and served in the U.S. Army from 1973-78, earning the rank of captain and receiving the Army Commendation Medal for Meritorious Service. His father, Edward, who died 4-1/2 years ago at the age of 92, was a veteran of World War II, retiring from service as a colonel before enjoying a second career in education as a professor at the College of Staten Island.

Erin graduated from Howard University School of Law and is clerking for a U.S. Court of Veterans Appeals judge in Washington, D.C. His son, Chip, is working for GM Planworks, a major ad agency in New York City.

As a teen, Johnson was active in Scouting, a program that still touches his heart. He also has been involved in the National Street Law Program, "which has produced a partnership between GM and Detroit Public Schools in an initiative that encourages urban high school students to consider legal careers," Johnson indicated. He has been recognized by General Motors in an ad campaign for helping it "change the legal profession by actively developing a diverse legal staff and encouraging its outside counsel to do the same." In 2004, Johnson was saluted by the American Bar Association for his leadership efforts in promoting diversity in the legal profession with the Spirit of Excellence Award. That same year he received the Michael Franck Award from the State Bar of Michigan, an honor signifying his role in championing diversity causes.

His family roots trace back to a baseball Hall of Famer who helped break the color barrier in the national pastime. Johnson's uncle was Brooklyn Dodger great

"In each city, we will be doing educational seminars for veterans regarding their rights to federal veterans benefits; providing a free training session to attorneys interested in helping veterans pro bono with federal benefits; and also doing intake with individual veterans regarding their own particular cases," Dean Gordon wrote in an e-mail to UDM law alumni.

"This is a substantial undertaking for us, but I think it makes sense," Gordon added. "It will train our students in a way that others schools do not, and it will serve a population—veterans—which has already served us all."

And to that, Johnson heartily agrees.

"I'm very sensitive to the plight of veterans who have risked or, in some cases, given their lives in service to their country," Johnson said. "We owe a debt of gratitude to them and this project is one way to say thanks."

Gordon, in a phone interview while helping with the tour in Florida, said the burgeoning national program has not only aided scores of veterans with federal benefits issues, but also has enriched the lives of the UDM law students and faculty members involved with the project.

"The stories that we've heard from veterans have been nothing short of amazing," Gordon said.