Patricia Gatling’s mission: to make a difference in Brooklyn

American woman who has since become one of the top law enforcement agents in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Born in Annapolis, but always on the move with her military family, Patricia Gatling ’82 grew up with the violence and fury of the civil rights movement in Mississippi, Georgia and Alabama. Like other African Americans growing up in the South, she encountered pervasive prejudice. Although she and her cousin were the first students to desegregate their school in Mississippi, they still rode a segregated bus. “People didn’t understand how violent the South was back then. My father was in the military. He was a war veteran. Yet he was still subjected to racial prejudice everywhere in the South. It was all about skin color,” says Gatling. In a way, growing up in the racial violence of the 1960s prepared her for the rough streets of Brooklyn, where, as deputy district attorney for Kings County, she works hard to improve the quality of life in one of the toughest cities in the United States.

Her involvement with the civil rights movement was a major reason for her decision to attend the University of Maryland School of Law years later. “I liked the way Maryland aggressively recruited minority students,” notes Gatling. She says that she appreciated the way the University encouraged BLSA (Black Law Students Association) to flourish and become an integral part of the law school. The presence of a large number of African-American alumni provided a number of excellent role models for minority students as well. Even so, Gatling maintains that law school was just one

“The Ku Klux Klan welcomes you to Mississippi.”

This was a sign of the times in the Deep South in the 1960s. Unfortunately for the Klan, similar statements provided the impetus for the legal career of a young African-
piece of her overall education in law. She says, "My perception of law wasn’t about what I learned in the classroom, it was about what I learned outside the classroom."

Gatling may have grown up in the midst of hatred and ignorance, but her career has been guided by a strong foundation of family values, a sense of community and faith in God. "I grew up in a religious household that was very community-oriented. I bring these values to my job every day," she explains. Her role models were judges who had the courage to help shape the Constitution to reflect equality among all people, regardless of skin color. For Gatling, corporate law and private practice were never options. She preferred the public sector and, rather than making money for someone else, felt that helping people should be a top priority.

As a prosecutor for the past 16 years, Gatling has done everything from prosecute misdemeanors to spearhead full-scale narcotics investigations. Some of the highlights from her case load include corruption cases involving public officials, and police and corrections officers; police brutality cases; death-in-custody cases; and grand jury investigations.

She is more than just a prosecutor, she is a policy-maker. She also has conducted numerous lectures on career development, trial advocacy and minority recruitment. While the courtroom is an integral part of her duties, it is equally important for her to plan community outreach programs and implement drug prevention programs. She states, "The courtroom exists to serve justice, but it often serves the egos of the players involved in each case. My role as a policy-maker has a much bigger impact on the community as a whole."

Gatling and her office's community outreach programs have received national acclaim. Currently, she oversees the Community and Law Enforcement Resources Together (ComAlert) program in Brooklyn.Created in 1999 by Kings County District Attorney Charles Hynes, it was designed as a re-entry, diversion and enforcement program in Brooklyn for individuals on parole or probation. Recently, the program was the focus of a Newsweek article that profiled ComAlert and a number of similar initiatives nationwide. Basically, the program is designed to connect its clients to a large network of community-based organizations. It draws on collaborations among the New York City Police Department, the Department of Corrections, the New York State Department of Parole, the New York City Department of Probation and various other state and federal law enforcement agencies. "The ComAlert program exists to give ex-offenders a second chance. We provide a number of services that are designed to strengthen the community and help reduce recidivism rates," says Gatling. She reports that since the program started, less than two percent of the participants involved have committed crimes again. ComAlert provides important services including job training and placement, education, substance abuse treatment, housing, youth activities and recreation. Currently, the ComAlert network includes more than 80 organizations providing valuable services to individuals who were formerly incarcerated, and also to gang members and court-involved youth. Gatling points out that ComAlert not only saves on the cost associated with housing an inmate, it also serves as a major step in saving families and communities from crime and violence. Gatling is thrilled with the program's success. "My work as a DA has come full circle. My department is making a concerted effort to rehabilitate many of the same individuals we put behind bars in the past. The community outreach programs expand the concept of what prosecutors are all about," affirms Gatling.

The Office of the Kings County District Attorney goes above and beyond the duties of a normal DA's office, one that Gatling describes as "atypical." In addition to the ComAlert program, the office has a nationally recognized drug treatment program and all assistant district attorneys are required to mentor fifth graders in the community once a week. Gatling states simply, "We are all about serving the community in a positive way."