

Project aims to bring justice system to life

Education program focuses on reform in Latin America

By **Leonel Sanchez**
STAFF WRITER

A San Diego-based legal think tank that teaches Latin American lawyers about the U.S. judicial system is trying to draw a bigger audience.

Proyecto ACCESO has unveiled a line of products — clothing, beauty kits, a cartoon series and trading cards — that it plans to market throughout the Americas.

Each product is tied to the dramatic judicial reforms taking place in Latin America. The goal is to raise public awareness of the changes, said James Cooper, director of Proyecto ACCESO, based at the California Western School of Law.

Most Latin American countries are in the process of switching from written to oral trials, which are the norm in the United States and inspire more confidence because of their transparency.

Since 1998, Proyecto ACCESO has trained more than 1,600 lawyers in 15 countries to conduct oral trials, write legislation and negotiate across cultures. The U.S. State Department has sponsored some of the training workshops.

"One thing is to talk to lawyers and judges, the other thing is to win the hearts and minds of the public about the importance of the rule of law," said Cooper, an assistant dean at the law school.

The nonprofit group is looking for investors to produce and sell the merchandise, which is closely tied to core democratic values. The line of clothing for example includes the "transparency jacket," the "free media helmet," and the "judicial independent vest."

Cooper said he came up with the idea of using pop culture to popularize judicial reform in 2002, after an opinion poll in Chile showed that most people weren't aware of the historical changes taking place there, including the introduction of a public defenders office.

Unfortunately, Cooper said, "publicizing the rule of law is

not a priority for many of these governments, because they're so busy cleaning up after (emerging from long periods of) dictatorships."

Proyecto ACCESO, the Spanish acronym for Creative Lawyers Collaborating to Find Optimal Solutions, is made up of U.S. and Latin American lawyers, judges, law students and professors.

Most of the group's financial support comes from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, which in 2003 renewed its funding with a three-year, \$600,000 grant.

Proyecto ACCESO is using proceeds from some of its legal training contracts with governments and private universities in Latin America to support the development of the rule of law merchandise. Cooper is looking for retailers in Chile and the United States to carry the products.

Cooper is also developing an MTV-like reality series about lawyers as well as a cartoon series for children. He is shopping both programs to Spanish-language networks in the United States and Latin America.



"The Flame of Justice," or *La Flama de Justicia*, is a superhero used by Proyecto ACCESO to raise public awareness of the judicial reforms taking place in Latin America. *Courtesy photo*

The characters for both are based on several of Proyecto ACCESO's instructors who've adopted superhero names over the years to raise public awareness of the judicial reforms taking place in Latin America. They include "The New York Street Fighting Lawyer," "The Flame of Justice," and "The Su-

perdefender."

"People don't want to read the law, but they'll like watching the cartoon and learning about the law," Cooper said.

For more information about the group, call (619) 525-1436.

Leonel Sanchez: (619) 542-4568; leonel.sanchez@uniontrib.com