It was dinner time on a Monday evening, and as they finished eating, Jala Conley and her classmates were carefully considering the questions Professor Emily Buss had posed in their Juvenile Justice seminar at the Law School. The issues were particularly tough that night: Why are minority youth disproportionately arrested and incarcerated? What can society, schools, law enforcement, and the courts do to address “disproportionate minority contact” with its devastating impact on youth of color? “It’s a problem, and we haven’t figured out how to solve it,” Buss, the Mark and Barbara Fried Professor of Law, had told the class before they broke into small groups. She’d given them a smile as she announced their assignment for the remainder of class: “It’s up to you all—you have an hour.”

What followed was remarkable, though not because the students shared keen observations and made surprising connections—although they did—but because they were mostly between the ages of 15 and 18. The new class, a modified version of the seminar Buss teaches Law School students, was designed for a small group of University-affiliated high school pupils interested in delving into the complicated issues of youth justice. For eight weeks this winter, the teens—eight from the Laboratory High School and seven from the University of Chicago Woodlawn Charter School—studied law, engaged in frank discussion and analysis, and offered their unique perspectives on juvenile offenders, culpability, disproportionate minority contact, crime prevention, and youth interactions with police. Eight law students, all 2Ls and 3Ls enrolled in Buss’s Law School seminar, served as teaching assistants (TAs)—an experience that introduced them to new views on youth justice and led to unexpected mentoring relationships. “There is a freshness about how young people approach things, what they’re willing to say,” Buss said. “They are
full of ideas, they are full of enthusiasm, and when they’re excited about something, the sky is the limit.”

As Conley’s group grappled with questions of racial bias and school discipline, they were passionate and pensive and often delivered what seemed to be deeply personal commentary.

“I think the schools with students of color have tough rules because they know that’s how the real world is going to treat us,” Conley, then a senior at Woodlawn, told her classmates. “I don’t think they always go about it the right way, but they’re letting us know that that’s how the world is going to handle us, and this way, we can learn to react.”

After a few minutes of discussion, law student Keiko Rose, ’15, threw out a question: “How do we change the world then? Is it top down, such as the legislators enacting laws, or is at the ground level, such as working on everyday interactions between people?”

Conley answered quickly. “It’s the everyday interaction,” she said. “Police don’t know how to treat students of color. So people have to engage and make connections, otherwise everyone’s just basing things on assumptions. You can’t assume just because someone is of color that they’re up to no good. You have to go in without seeing color, I guess.”

Maybe then, Rose ventured, there’s a place for programs designed to foster positive interaction between minority teenagers and police?

Conley considered it for a moment then shook her head. “For teenagers, no, that’s not going to work at all because we already have our minds set up about the police,” she said. “But if you started with smaller children, maybe it would work. It would make the kids’ minds clearer, and make the adults’ minds clear, too, because these are still just children.”

Later, as Buss reflected on the exchange, she noted that what made the discussions especially interesting, for the students and for her, was that for every student viewpoint, there was a counterview. “The students learned about developing an argument and also showed an openness to persuasive counterarguments,” Buss said. “And I got the valuable reminder that there is no more a single youth view than there is a single adult view on these issues.”

The idea to offer the Juvenile Justice seminar to high school students grew out of Buss’s scholarly interest in how young people’s experiences with, and observations of, law enforcement affect their social identity development.

“Adolescents are in the process of crossing over into adulthood, and in this sense they challenge the law’s age-based categories,” Buss said. “They aren’t children. They aren’t adults. They’re in a transitional phase, and while much of the law is designed to try to help children, the law is not well designed to help adolescents to grow out of childhood. We’re better at drawing lines and having two sets of rules than figuring out how to get young people from here to there.”

So part of it was wanting to hear from young people and wanting some of her law students to hear from them, too. But Buss, who has strong ties to Lab as a parent and a former board member, also wanted to foster interaction among students from Lab, a private school that is more than half Caucasian, and Woodlawn, a public charter school that is nearly 98 percent African-American and operated by the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute.

What she didn’t know at the beginning was how the relationships and discussions would unfold among the participants. The project was an experiment, a concept
Buss encouraged the students to embrace, offering them opportunities to give feedback through weekly “plus/minus cards.” In addition, there was this: law professors, and law students, don’t traditionally spend their time teaching high school students. Buss believed that the project was valuable, in part because it offered the law student TAs a chance to engage deeply on the issues they were studying in their Law School class.

“For the law students, several of whom were drawn to the opportunity because they have worked as teachers or hope to focus on juvenile justice issues as lawyers, the class offered a peek into how teens think, interpret, and process information about the law.

Aasiya Glover, ’15, enjoyed seeing the teens experience sudden breakthroughs in understanding as they connected the dots between different topics. One student, following a discussion on *Miranda* rights, sent her a text message saying he thought the discussion had “gotten to the heart of the problems of the twenty-first century.”

“He was so self-aware, and he found himself identifying with this particular issue in juvenile justice,” she said. “It got him excited, and he related it to larger systemic issues.”

As the weeks passed, moments like this continued to unfold, and something else—something less tangible—began to emerge. Many of those involved felt sure it had something to do with the broadening sense of community, the subtle shifts in understanding, and the friendships that had begun to take shape. There were sparks of recognition even when experiences differed, or moments when one student “got” what another student was saying. For some, there was a growing sense that these interactions mattered far beyond the classroom.
“The kids from the two schools seemed to enjoy working with each other so much, and we enjoyed working with them, too, and that’s really encouraging,” said Jamie Schulte, ’15. “So much of our juvenile justice system is socioeconomically driven, but we saw that this idea of collaboration among different populations could be helpful.”

Schulte, who worked for two years as a sixth-grade English teacher in Houston, said the two groups talked candidly about differences but also found common ground.

“It’s been interesting to see how different some of their experiences are, but how similar their ideas are,” she said.

Added Shelton Meyers, then a sophomore at Woodlawn: “It was an amazing pleasure to interact with the Lab students and law students. Many of the kids in that seminar were outstandingly different and had very vigorous imaginations that could come together to create possible solutions on how we could better our community. It was really refreshing to hear from other students that think and observe the way I do.”

Some law students were surprised to find themselves identifying with the high school students they mentored or developing bonds as they swapped texts after class. This was the case for Ethel Amponsah, ’16, who was assigned as the teaching assistant to two female Woodlawn students.

She regularly exchanged text messages with the students and sometimes met them for brunch, where they talked about school issues, college, and the future. The students taught her things, too.

“I’ve learned that I probably underestimate the abilities of young people,” she said. “They have far exceeded my expectations. I don’t know if it’s just that I don’t remember what it’s like to be 17, but I am always blown away by what they’re thinking and what they can do. And I’ve learned that I have something to offer them.”

It has added depth to her understanding of the juvenile justice issues she explores in the Law School class, too. Sometimes, the teens’ perspective reflected their unique spot at the intersection of childhood and adulthood.

“Some of the students strongly rejected the Supreme Court’s recent analysis concluding that adolescents should be considered less blameworthy for their crimes based on their age. This resistance makes sense because, more than anything, they want to be and be treated like adults,” Buss said. “But, in another exercise where they were asked to use a pie chart to divide a budget among various sorts of programming in response to juvenile crime, a lot of them were drawn to programs that focused on avoiding youth incarceration. In this exercise, they were heavily influenced by the social science that suggests that incarcerating young people just turns them into criminals.”

Later that spring, once the class was complete and Buss had some distance, she was able to reflect more fully on what it meant. By then, the seniors in the group had heard from colleges, and Buss knew that at least two, including Jala Conley, had been admitted to UChicago. She’d seen their final projects—they either wrote a paper or produced a PowerPoint presentation on an issue addressed in the class—and she’d had a chance to process the experience.

She was impressed, for instance, by how much the students had grown in just eight weeks.

“The high school students got increasingly good at thinking about other people’s participation in the group and making sure there was room for disagreement,” Buss said. “In that way, they showed the best kind of intellectual humility and humility about the limits of their own experience.”

But what really struck Buss was how valuable it was to simply have an opportunity to share the UChicago way with younger members of the University community.

“It was hugely rewarding to create, alongside eight talented and committed law students, a new intellectual community for this group of high school students,” she said. “I think the creation of this community had tremendous value for both groups of high school students, for the law students, for all of us. We were all playing out the University of Chicago ideal: engaging with one another about ideas, and testing our own and others’ ideas in a very positive and supportive context. Sharing our intellectual culture with young people felt incredibly important.”

Aasiya Glover, ’15, enjoyed seeing the teen students connect the dots between different topics.