



ILLINOIS STATE
BAR ASSOCIATION

THE CHALLENGE

The newsletter of the ISBA's Standing Committee on Minority and Women Participation

(Notice to librarians: No issues were published in Volume 17 of this newsletter during the fiscal year ending June 30, 2007.)

Letter from the Chair

By Andy Fox

The Standing Committee on Minority and Women Participation is comprised of lawyers from all over the state who selflessly serve the mission of increasing diversity and participation for minorities and women in the legal profession.

We tackle the issues that confront minorities and women lawyers and have set an ambitious goal of pushing the agenda of increasing the percentages of minority law students, minority lawyers in law firms and minority partners. We see ourselves as a source and a partner for the ever increasing need of lawyers to reflect the communities they represent. The percentage of minorities in the legal profession is not moving at the same pace as the population shifts in the United States. We struggle with ways to help students from diverse backgrounds attain the dream of becoming a lawyer. That means we sup-

port students in the educational continuum from literacy through law school in our mission to create a more just legal system for all.

For those of us who actively participate on the Committee, we are called to serve the communities we represent and to reach back in the educational continuum to create more diversity in the legal profession. This year we plan to co-host a variety of high school, law student and lawyer focused activities aimed at enhancing diversity in the legal community. In the St. Louis Metro East area, we plan to partner with law students from Southern Illinois University School of Law and other law school in the area to create one or two programs tailored to the specific needs of minority and women lawyers. We are actively seeking co-sponsors, lawyers and law students to make sure the panels and the law student receptions after will be a total success.

In the Chicago area, we hope to co-host a law school event at DePaul University on November 3, 2007, from 1 to 5 p.m. We plan to provide three panel discussions involving a diverse group of practicing lawyers to discuss: How to Become a Partner (with subtle conversations about a perception that there is a glass ceiling for minorities), General Counsel Forum, and Alternative Paths to a Successful Legal



Andy Fox

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Career. We are looking for speakers, so if you know of potential candidates from small, medium or large law firms, from corporations, from the solo-practitioner world or from the public service sector, please contact me directly at fox.andrew@comcast.net.

We are also planning a Spring Law Day at John Marshall Law School where we will bring local high school students and their parents for an all day boot camp on what it takes to become a lawyer. We plan on having tracks for both the parents and the students to get them interested in law as a career and to create mock law school classroom settings so they can begin down that "path less traveled."

The ISBA has been an incredible supporter of each and every idea we have been able to present. This year, Joe Bisceglia, the President of the ISBA, has been actively involved in the planning and coordination of the mission of our Committee. President Bisceglia has named the Diversity Task Force to focus on the issue of achieving greater diversity in the legal profession.

For me, this promises to be an exciting year, and I want to look back and feel like we made a real difference in the short time we were able to serve.

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Continuing the hallmark of diversity awareness at the 4th Annual Peoria County Bar Association's Diversity Luncheon

By Sonni Choi Williams

On September 17, 2007, the Peoria County Bar Association's Diversity Committee held its fourth annual Diversity Luncheon and continued the tradition of highlighting the importance of diversity in the legal profession. There were close to 300 attendees including students from local high schools, Northern Illinois University College of Law, Southern Illinois University School of Law, Illinois Central College's Upward Bound Program, and South Side College Club (programs aimed at assisting underprivileged students on the road to higher education). Also in attendance were local judges, civic leaders, community organizations, and a strong contingent from the ISBA Board of Governors.

During the program's opening, ISBA President Joe Bisceglia announced the formation of the ISBA Task Force on Diversity and lauded the Peoria County Bar Association's diversity initiatives, including the Diversity Luncheons, as ahead of the curve. The PCBA Diversity Committee presented a plaque to NIU Dean LeRoy Pernell to recognize and thank him for his contribution to the goals of the Diversity Committee. Dean Pernell will soon be leaving the area to become dean of the Florida A&M College of Law.

The PCBA Diversity Committee announced three recipients of the Diversity Scholarship, which increased this year from \$1,000 to \$1,500 per recipient. One of the three recipients, Melodi Green, an African-American third-year law student at SIU School of Law, was also a previous scholarship winner. A Peoria native, Melodi plans to practice in Peoria and is a prime example of how the Diversity Committee's programs, including funding the Diversity Scholarship, have paid off in dividends. Melodi was present at the Diversity Luncheon to accept her scholarship.

The second recipient, Rocio S. Becerril, a second-year law student at NIU College of Law, is a first-generation



From left to right: Dean Peter C. Alexander of SIU School of Law; Michele Jochner, member of the ISBA Board of Governors; Sonni Choi Williams, member of the ISBA Minority and Women Participation Committee; Joe Bisceglia, ISBA President; and Dean LeRoy Pernell of NIU College of Law.

college graduate. The third recipient, Shannon D. Taylor, a first-year law student at St. Louis University School of Law, was born and raised in Rantoul, Illinois. Shannon has been actively involved with the NAACP.

This year's keynote speaker, Dean Peter C. Alexander of SIU School of Law titled his speech, "Why Care?" Dean Alexander posed this question in the context of why everyone should care about diversity. He answered the question with a story of how United States Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren, prior to the landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, learned about racial discrimination in the south when his driver had to sleep in the car because the area hotels would not allow accommodations for African-Americans. Dean Alexander emphasized that diversity does not mean taking jobs from people who have held the jobs for centuries, but instead it is about the opportunity to learn from each other, and that all groups have something to offer and something to voice. The message was that we all can learn from each other and keep our individual identities while joined in one nation and one profession. Dean Alexander also noted that he was in a room full of people who cared, but that they need to bring this message

to others outside of the Luncheon and to reach out to everyone.

The Diversity Luncheon highlighted other programs implemented by the PCBA Diversity Committee to diversify the legal field so that it better reflects the community. Those efforts include the mentorship program with the Illinois Central College's Upward Bound Program (a program to assist in first generation college bound local high school students through tutoring, job training, and mentoring) to plug the "leak" in the pipeline to the profession and get qualified minority students into the legal field; funding and assisting the ABA Judicial Internship program; and funding and awarding the Diversity Scholarship. As with all the previous luncheons, proceeds from this year's Diversity Luncheon help fund the Diversity Scholarship.

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South Africa: Transformed by truth and democracy

By Gino Betts Jr.

This summer I had the opportunity to study abroad in Cape Town, South Africa, through Howard University School of Law. The experience did not prove to be exactly what I expected, but in the end it was much more than I could have ever imagined. During the grueling 26-hour trip, I conjured up images of what I thought the Motherland would be like. Most of my fantasies consisted of the stereotypical depictions broadcasted on various media outlets. I expected to see dark babies with sagging skin and potbellies roaming the streets while flies circled their bald heads like vultures. I thought I would see a makeshift hospital filled to capacity with HIV patients neighboring our living quarters, and I knew I would experience at least one of the Big Five (lion, leopard, rhino, buffalo, and elephant) menacingly trampling through our village. My expectations were so off the mark that, as I write this, it is difficult for me to concede the extent of my ignorance.

When we finally landed, our group was transported to a luxurious hotel, which housed an extravagant restaurant and a spectacular winery, right in the heart of Cape Town. After unpacking, I toured the city with my roommates to get a feel for the environment. I kept a pocket full of rands, South African currency, just in case I ran into any of the indigent images shown on television. I did meet a few homeless individuals that I was able to assist, but the great majority of my brothers and sisters were "dressed to the nines." The tremendous European influence on fashion and culture overwhelmed me. The never-ending parade of double Windsor knots and Rock & Republic jeans made the streets of Cape Town resemble a runway in Paris. I was perplexed. I had been in Africa a full day and had not seen a single wild animal or lady transporting water on her head from a communal source. I did not even see Sally Struthers telling me how I could save the world for only a nickel



Gino visits with children in South Africa.

a day. From that moment on, I decided to relinquish all my preconceptions and to become a student of the true nature of South Africa.

When classes began, we were delighted to learn that our Comparative Constitutional Law instructor was an internationally esteemed South African Constitutional Court Justice. His name is Albie Sachs. Justice Sachs also served as one of the framers of South Africa's relatively young constitution, so we gave his knowledge of the document the benefit of the doubt. In his younger years, he devoted his life to being a freedom fighter for the African National Congress. As an advocate, Justice Sachs zealously challenged South Africa's apartheid regime; consequently, he lost an arm and an eye in an apartheid proponent's attempt to assassinate him. During his lectures, Justice Sachs' dynamic voice barely registered above a whisper whenever he described the atrocities and indignities endured by the victims of those previously in power. In contrast, his face would illuminate with joy when he spoke about South Africa's strides towards justice with the creation of its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which offered assistance to victims of the old system and amnesty to perpetrators of hateful acts that came for-

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ward to admit their crimes.

The great courage and dignity of the people, along with the astounding beauty of South Africa, impressed me in ways beyond explanation. The light of democracy has shone over that nation calming its inclement social and political climate, and witnessing that transformation has been one of the highlights of my life. The significance of what is transpiring over there rivals both the strides towards equality made during the Reconstruction Era and the commitment to change displayed following the Civil Rights Era in our own nation. Great things are on the horizon in South Africa, and I encourage all capable of making the journey to bear witness to history in the making.

Preamble to the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa

We, the people of South Africa,
Recognise the injustices of our past;
Honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land;
Respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and
Believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.
We therefore, through our freely elected representatives, adopt this Constitution as the supreme law of the Republic so as to

- Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;
- Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law;
- Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and
- Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.

May God protect our people.
Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika. Morena boloka setjhaba sa heso.
God seën Suid Afrika. God bless South Africa.
Mudzimu fhatutshedza Afurika. Hosi katekisa Afrika.

The entire text of the Constitution is available at
<http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/index.htm>.



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