



Inclusive at Its Core

Having just completed the first “FDR Goes Digital” Presidential Chat, the topic for which was the Bar’s efforts to improve diversity, I thought I would take this opportunity to bring those of you who couldn’t participate (and that’s probably most of you taking the time to read this) up to date on where our diversity initiatives have been and where they hope to go.

Fostering diversity in the profession has been one of the organization’s core values for more than a decade.

First, however, let me put to rest any notion that diversity is some sort of “flavor of the month” issue that your State Bar features for brief periods of time, and then puts back on the shelf until the mood moves us to revisit it. To the contrary, fostering diversity in the profession has been one of the organization’s core values for more than a decade, starting with the adoption in 1993 of our “Statement of Goals for Increasing Minority and Women Representation and Retention” (read it and other guiding documents online at www.myazbar.org/SecComm/TF/DivTF). Throughout the subsequent

period, we strove to serve that core value through our Committee on Minorities and Women in the Law, our Committee on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, and our Committee on Persons With Disabilities in the Legal Profession.

The effort was revitalized under the guidance of President Helen Perry Grimwood with her appointment of a special Diversity Task Force composed of approximately 80 attorneys, judges, legal educators, Bar staff and community leaders from throughout Arizona. That Task Force, which continues to function, made two initial action recommendations to the Board of Governors: hire and empower a full-time Diversity Director, and institute and conduct a Bar Leadership Institute to train for leadership in the profession young lawyers selected from groups historically underrepresented in leadership positions. The Board approved both and, I am pleased to report, has accomplished both.

The State Bar now has a Diversity Director, Mr. I. Godwin Otu, as a member of senior management of the organization. He has already formed an internal Diversity Committee and is working on, among other things, the launch of a Diversity in Action Alliance, which will furnish a forum for the leaders of Arizona’s legal community to collaborate on increasing recruitment, promotion and retention of minority lawyers. The initial year of our Bar Leadership Institute is almost complete, and it has been a resounding success and extremely well received by the 15 participants. Applications for the second year’s class are available

(www.myazbar.org/BarLeadership), and I encourage those of you who are eligible to apply or, if you’re not eligible, to convince other candidates to do so. Now that these two goals have been reached, our Diversity Task Force, working with our Diversity Director, will be formulating new recommendations for further steps to take.

Questions that naturally occur at this point, at least to me, are: What exactly is the Bar trying to accomplish, and why are we devoting so many resources and so much effort to diversity initiatives?

Well, we are trying to create a legal profession and a legal system that reflects the community it serves, and that community is becoming increasingly diverse. Arizona has become a multicultural society in our lifetime, and our Hispanic population is expected to become the majority culture within the next decade.

Far more important, appreciating the value of a diverse profession serving an equally diverse community makes us more effective lawyers. In the final analysis, *diversity*, simply stated, is *difference*. It might be nice, but it would be incredibly boring, if all our colleagues, clients and the jurors we occasionally attempt to convince were plucked from some homogeneous mass of the populace that included ourselves.

It doesn’t work that way, folks. As members of the legal profession, we interact on a daily basis with people whose comprehension of our message is screened through filters formed by backgrounds, experiences and cultural histories that bear no resemblance to ours. If we are not equipped to deal with those differences, our ability to function as lawyers suffers.

Finally, this is the land of opportunity. If we as a profession do not do our utmost to make that promise of equal opportunity a reality, we risk forfeiting our rightful place as keepers of the flame that makes this country great. 

