

PROFILES

Committee on Diversity in the Profession: Moving Ahead . . . but Slowly

By Pamela W. Carter

The U.S. Census figures from 2000 confirm that America is a diverse nation, with 30 percent of its citizenry comprised of people of color and 51 percent women. It is estimated that ethnic and racial minorities will reach 50 percent of the U.S. population by the year 2050. With these growing percentages of minorities within the populace, the importance of diversity in today's society is unquestioned, and Americans have come to value diversity for the vibrant spirit it brings to our personal and professional lives. The Committee on Diversity in the Profession seeks to bring that same recognition of value to the legal system generally and to TIPS specifically. According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, African Americans are making steady but slow progress in joining the ranks of managers and legal professionals in the private law firm sector some 40 years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964

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banned employment discrimination based on race. Women, too, are making progress. However, our nation's diverse population is not proportionately reflected in the legal profession and especially in leadership positions, either for women or for racial or ethnic minorities. Because lawyers are among the most powerful players in social, economic, and political circles, the ability of women and minorities to obtain equality in the profession must be facilitated with "all deliberate speed."

The function of the Committee on Diversity in the Profession is to realize greater participation of minority and women attorneys within TIPS and to ultimately reflect the society we serve. The committee's mission is to help racially and ethically diverse lawyers and female lawyers to advance their careers and standing in the profession. Specifically, the committee's goals are to provide (1) leadership programs, (2) opportunities for professional advancement, and (3) information to help the profession understand and eliminate racism, bigotry, and discrimination within its ranks. The committee seeks to facilitate this goal by assisting TIPS general committees in recruiting and involving minority members and women, and by promoting greater awareness and appreciation of the need to accomplish greater diversity. During this past year, the Committee on

Diversity in the Profession has aided women, racial and ethnic minorities, and gay and lesbian lawyers to serve on and lead TIPS committees and programs. While proud of our progress, we have set our sights even higher.

Unfortunately, progress has been slower than anticipated or needed. We have not moved with the necessary urgency to devise programs, events, and opportunities geared to eliminate the racial injustice and gender bias that has scarred the legal system. We recognize that we still have a long way to go.

New Approaches

Our committee has participated in a variety of mentoring, leadership, and outreach programs this year tailored to the needs of minorities and women. These programs foster diversity within TIPS and enhance opportunities for people within the communities we serve. Minority and female lawyers need opportunities to charge forward and to create more equal career paths and a more diverse TIPS.

The committee has taken many steps to ensure that TIPS provides lawyers from diverse backgrounds leadership opportunities, unique programming, and minority-sponsored events. Our diversity outreach and efforts in 2005 have included:

- inviting local minority attorneys to TIPS meetings and providing them with

free tickets to CLE and receptions to introduce them to TIPS programs and leadership opportunities;

- sponsoring receptions with local minority bars and partnering with them to provide networking events that feature women and minority lawyers in TIPS;
- collaborating with national and regional ABA program planners to provide speaking opportunities for minorities and women so that they may present their unique viewpoints on critical issues;
- holding diversity receptions, cocktail parties, and dinners that bring together minority lawyers and TIPS leadership, engendering networking and relationship building opportunities;
- meeting with local minority bar leaders to obtain recommendations for TIPS leadership appointments and seminar scholarships;
- mentoring and networking with young minority lawyers to fill future TIPS leadership posts;
- recruiting minorities and women by hosting recep-

tions and seminars for lawyers and pairing them with TIPS leaders to serve as mentors; and

- working to remodel the TIPS Web site to provide useful information regarding programs and to highlight development issues, program funding, and scholarship opportunities for TIPS meetings and seminars.

The committee hosted the events noted above with the idea of being more inclusive, expanding opportunities for lawyers to understand multiple perspectives, and offering additional opportunities to examine what is needed to truly diversify the Section and the legal profession. Through its programs and events, and the dialogue that emerges from them, the committee is challenging the obstacles that hinder equality within the profession.

Looking Ahead

Equality within the profession and within TIPS has not yet been attained. The challenge for TIPS members today is to recognize the lack of involvement and leadership of minority and women lawyers in TIPS and the profession—and then

to set about actively changing it.

Today we are committed to the diversity struggle in the profession. Diversity is a value that guides the leaders of the committee and is among its highest priorities. The heart of the mission for the committee is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities. We believe it must be possible for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to race, gender, or color. While we are very proud of our progress regarding diversity within TIPS, we need to progress further. Our many efforts with regional and local bar associations have gone a long way toward providing opportunities for diverse lawyers, and our planned future strategies are excellent starting points for committee leaders concerned with making our organization one where women and minorities can thrive, survive, and lead.

What is apparent is that we all need to work diligently at removing structural, social, and cultural barriers if women and minorities are to get ahead in the legal profession. If you want to be involved, please contact me at pcarter@bakerdonelson.com or the committee chair, Vani Singhal, at vsinghal@ecslok.com. ■