

Law firms create pathways for minority students to participate

Diversity programs allow real-world immersion into legal field

By PATRICK HARNEY

The legal profession is slowly making gains in becoming more diverse, but there is still plenty of work to be done, according to a study by the National Association of Law Placement.

The report, covering diversity in U.S.-based law firms for 2017, noted how there was a slight increase in "representation of women, minorities, and minority women among associates" but also made clear how those figures are still "below pre-recession levels."

For minority students looking to work in the legal profession, the numbers have started to move upward since 2010, from 19.53 percent to 23.32 percent, according to the study. In an effort to see those numbers rise even further, several local programs strive to provide a pathway for minority law students to enter the profession.

One example is the Diversity Scholar Program launched by Ward Greenberg Heller & Reidy LLP. Each summer, a first-year law student is offered an opportunity to work at the firm's Rochester-based office for a period of 10 weeks. Successful applicants are provided a \$7,500 bonus along with opportunities to work with various legal teams at the office, including a temporary work assignment at one of the firm's institutional clients.

The goal of this program is to provide real world opportunities for students, not "fluff pieces," according to Ward Greenberg partner Jeffrey Harradine, who also emphasized the value of letting the students work without close supervision.

"It's really without a net, and that's when people shine."

Harradine spearheaded the program, making it a reality following discussions with the firm's hiring committee. Deliberations with fellow partners and associates on the panel indicated a need for the "attraction and retention of talent from a variety of backgrounds."

Following these results, the firm organized a comprehensive application process. Prospective law students needed to provide a resume, an undergraduate transcript and various written materials, including a statement discussing how they intend to contribute to Ward Greenberg's ob-

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jective of maintaining a diverse and inclusive team.

Harradine says the interview process is a two-way street. The committee interviewing the candidates looks to see whether "they can see them as a partner," while the applicants can do something similar, allowing them to get a sense of the firm.

After completing their first summer appointment, students are then invited to return for a second summer, depending on their performance.

Harradine says the firm has "received tremendously positive feedback from our clients," many of whom spoke highly of the program and its inaugural scholar, Senovia Cuevas.

Cuevas, who completed two summers with Ward Greenberg as their first Diversity Scholar, was recently hired as an associate attorney with the firm. Having grown interested in practicing law as a high school student through a mock trial club, she chose to attend the University at Buffalo Law School, searching for intern opportunities in her first year.

"It was important for me to stay local," she said, adding how Ward Greenberg's good reputation was an added incentive to apply for the program.

Cuevas said it was "daunting" to come in for an interview with the committee. However, while she had no idea what to expect, she found the staff to be extremely supportive, both during the interview and after being selected.

"I was able to jump right into cases," she said, mentioning a tax case she assisted on, something she "never thought I'd be interested in at all."

Now working as an associate with Ward Greenberg, Cuevas is looking

forward to her future.

"I still haven't found what my passion is, but I'm sure the attorneys will help me find it."

Cuevas stressed how important the Diversity Scholar Program was to her, serving as a crucial steppingstone for her career.

"There are a lot of barriers. And this program helps alleviate those pressures."

While Ward Greenberg's program is new for the firm, they have participated in similar programs including the Monroe County Bar Association's Diversity Clerkship Program. That program provided guidance for the Diversity Scholar project.

The Diversity Clerkship Program was first created by Michael Wolford, a partner with The Wolford Law Firm. He first began working on the program when he was president of the Monroe County Bar Association from 2004 to 2005 in an attempt "to address underrepresentation of racial diversity in the legal field."

Law students who completed the application process were interviewed before working for a summer at one of the eight initial firms that agreed to participate in the program, Wolford says.

While diversity was an important issue he was attempting to address, that wasn't the only reason for the creation of the program.

"We try to make it enjoyable to encourage our students to come back to Rochester," Wolford says.

Wolford is quite pleased with the program. However, he does acknowledge it's been difficult to keep students in the area.

Kevin Ryan, executive director of the Monroe County Bar Association, understands the complications

involved in fostering diversity in the legal field. Despite the outflow, Ryan says, there has been lots of success due to the MCBA's efforts, including getting additional sponsorships from legal advocacy organizations such as the Black Bar Association and the Greater Rochester Association of Women Attorneys.

While providing professional opportunities is an important element, Ryan says there are also efforts within the bar association to create a community of professionals who have similar backgrounds and experiences.

"We need to show them there's a community for them to fit into. Clerks most likely to come back to Rochester to practice have ties in the region. If we can create some ties, we stand a better chance of keeping them here," Ryan says.

One successful individual who is an alumnus of the Diversity Clerkship Program is Duwayne Bascoe, an associate attorney with the firm Abrams Fensterman. Having participated in the program in 2010 as a student from the University at Buffalo, Bascoe spoke directly about the opportunities.

"I can't say enough about their initiative," he says, noting the number of organizations that provide paid positions has increased significantly.

Bascoe also says that to fully measure the efficacy of the program, you can't just look at those who stayed in Rochester.

"You have to look a little deeper, to those exposed to Rochester, who moved to New York City and Chicago, then back, to show the success of the program," Bascoe says. "It's more successful looking through that lens."

Patrick Harney is a Rochester-area freelance writer.

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uations not only ensure job requirements are met, but are powerful motivators to encourage job growth and advancement opportunities by matching organizational needs and strategic goals with the particular assets the employee brings to the position.

Diversity, inclusion and equity initiatives require participation at every level of the organization, recognizing that people operate at different stages along the continuum. Encouraging employees to be and bring their authentic selves to the job are best modeled by leaders and managers alike. Sharing personal stories of challenge, difficulty and success reveal our humanness and approachabil-

ity. They create safety for others to take risks, try new ideas and develop team cohesion. For example, a CEO speaks openly about a mental health challenge at a vulnerable period of life. A manager reveals what it was like to be raised by a single parent during difficult times. A department head offers support and deep listening for an employee experiencing the recent loss of a loved one.

Opening ourselves to the experiences of others, both like and different from our own, brings wisdom and compassion. Such knowledge, aligned with emotional understanding, produce work environments where people get results by working effectively together.

Steve Jarose is the executive director of the National Coalition Building Institute of Rochester.