

## Talking About Diversity Is Not Enough

I have been receiving and reading *Virginia Lawyer* for over a decade. Most of the time I skim the articles and look to see if I know any of the lawyers who have been naughty and are facing disciplinary action. However when the issue of diversity within the profession began to be addressed in earnest I started reading the articles and the letters to the editor.

I grew up in Connecticut and moved to Virginia for law school. When I first learned that that Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert E. Lee shared the same holiday, I was surprised and in all honesty mortified. My northern sensibilities prevented me from wrapping my head around the fact that the general for the South and one of our greatest civil rights leaders were both acknowledged and honored on the same day.

Fast forward to 2009 and I have seen things change in the commonwealth. I am fortunate to practice in an area where there is great diversity both on the bench and in the bar. This diversity of spirit, belief, race, and religion is one of the things that I love most about my job, and I truly believe my world is richer due to my day-to-day experiences with people who do not always look like or think like me. In the spirit of moving forward with the Virginia State Bar's new initiative to actively pursue diversity I attended the Old Dominion Bar Association (ODBA) Annual Conference. My mentor, Beverly J.A. Burton, is the current president of the ODBA. She is the one who sent me the conference information, and the conference looked fantastic.

It was held at the Gaylord National Resort and Conference Center outside Washington, D.C. The hotel was beautiful and had amazing amenities, the cost was reasonable, and the program was comprehensive. Conference topics ranged from the Ethics of E-mail to Effective Jury Selection and Immigration Issues. The speakers and presenters were all experts in their

fields, and many members of the bench were slated to share their experience and expertise.

The biggest surprise that awaited me was that I was the only white person at the conference. While I did not expect to be in the majority, I was disappointed that no other white person in the entire state was a registered attendee. It is my belief that if we as a bar are going to talk about diversity and inclusion, then the reality is that it has to go both ways. Not only do we need to include those in the minority in "our conferences" but those of us in the majority have a responsibility to step forward and include ourselves in "other conferences."

I would not have traded my experience. I had the pleasure of meeting many people whom I have communicated with over the Internet for years. Everyone I met went out of their way to make me feel comfortable, I did get a few questions from those I knew, asking me, "What are you doing at the ODBA with your white self?" My response was the same one I give here: that in order to achieve true diversity and representation from all groups there must be action behind words. Talking about diversity is not enough. One can learn what it feels like to be in the minority, and one must be willing to walk one's talk. So to all of my fellow lawyers practicing in Virginia, I challenge you: choose one conference or continuing legal education program to attend in the next twelve months that would normally not be on your list. I promise that you will learn something about yourself and something about the law, and you will make our bar and the world a better place.

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## Letters

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