

Bringing Color to Virginia's Legal Profession: Young Lawyers Lead the Way

by Jennifer L. McClellan, Young Lawyers Conference President

WHILE GREAT STRIDES HAVE BEEN MADE in the legal profession with regard to diversity, the profession still does not reflect society at large. For example, in 2007, while women made up more than 50 percent of the U.S. population, they make up only 30.1 percent of lawyers, 17.9 percent of partners in private practice, 15.7 percent of Fortune 1000 general counsels, and 16.6 percent of Fortune 500 general counsels.¹

According to the 2000 Census, individuals of color made up approximately 30 percent of the U.S. population. However, minorities accounted for only about 9.7 percent of the profession as a whole.² Progress has been especially slow for minority women in the profession.³

We can and must do better to ensure that the bar reflects the society it serves and fosters an inclusive environment.

To that end, the Virginia State Bar Young Lawyers Conference has a long history of programs devoted to increasing the diversity of the legal profession.

First, the Minority Prelaw Conference was developed more than fifteen years ago for minority college students interested in a legal career. The conference provides basic advice about getting into and through law school, from Law School Admission Tests and financial aid to the bar exam. First held in the Richmond Circuit Court, the conference was a one-day event each April to provide information on the law school and early lawyering experience, with seminars on LSAT preparation, financial aid, challenges during law school, career guidance for postdegree attorneys, networking, a panel of the various legal career opportunities, and other topics relevant to potential attorneys. The program quickly outgrew the courthouse and was held at the University of Richmond for several years.

Participant feedback indicated a need to include more time for networking among the students, speakers, legal practitioners, and law school representatives. As a result, the YLC changed the conference to two days with more networking opportunities in February at George Mason University. However, students and college career counselors asked the YLC to restore an April conference. At the same time, the YLC Board observed a lack of participation from students west of Charlottesville. As a result, the YLC developed a second, one-day, conference at Washington and Lee University and targeted Southwest Virginia students. Over years, these programs have served thousands of students, some of whom are now practicing attorneys.

This year, the YLC will add a third conference to our roster at the College of William and Mary, for students east of Richmond.

In 2001, the YLC joined with the VSB's Millennium Diversity Initiative to implement the Oliver Hill/Samuel Tucker Institute to reach out to minority, disadvantaged, or academically at-risk students whose exposure to the legal system is through television (at best) or the juvenile justice system (at worst). For one week in July, students are introduced to the legal profession by living on a college campus and attending a number of classes and seminars on career opportunities in the law, test-taking strategies, and the college admissions process. Students meet with law school professors, judges, practitioners, guest lecturers, and state and local bar association members. Students also take a field trip to the Fourth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals to meet with Judge Roger L. Gregory, the first African American appointed to that court. This year, the students also toured the Virginia State Capitol and met with First Lady Anne B. Holton. The institute culminates in a mock trial and graduation banquet, where a prominent African American member of the bar is featured. For the first few years of the program, Oliver W. Hill attended the banquet to meet the students. We have now served more than one hundred students in this program, some of whom have completed college and are planning to enroll in law school next year.

Over the past twelve years, the YLC's Annual Bench/Bar Celebration Dinner honors newly elected women and minority judges from across the state, providing an opportunity for young lawyers to interact with the judges in a casual, relaxed atmosphere. Over the years, our keynote speakers have included Judge Gregory, former American Bar Association president Robert J. Grey Jr., Virginia Chief Justice Leroy R. Hassell Sr., First Lady Anne Holton, Judges James R. and Margaret P. Spencer, and Justice Elizabeth B. Lacy. This year's dinner on November 20 will feature Justice S. Bernard Goodwyn, who also served as a speaker in 1997 when he was appointed to the Chesapeake General District Court.

This year, the YLC will implement an ABA pipeline program for high school students of color titled Choose Law: A Profession for All. This program uses a video, a written guide, a website, attorney volunteers, and educators to encourage individuals of color to become attorneys. Students learn about the importance of the legal profession and how the law affects all aspects of their lives. The project also teaches students that attorneys of color have played a crucial role in the development of this noble profession. Choose Law shares the many opportunities open to lawyers and lays out a path for getting started.

The YLC is not satisfied to stop with these signature programs. Our Women & Minorities in the Profession Commission constantly reviews the state of our profession to look for opportunities for improvement. For example, last year, when VSB Executive Director Karen A. Gould posed the question of why women and minority lawyers usually do not stay active with the VSB when they “age out” of the YLC, the commission tackled that question head-on, resulting in a report and recommendations to the VSB Executive Committee. Their findings showed that VSB involvement beyond the YLC is not just a problem with women and minority lawyers, but with young lawyers as a whole.

As we look to enhance diversity, we must remember that diversity encompasses more than just gender, racial, and ethnic diversity. The Young Lawyers are also committed to, and will focus on this year, increasing diversity of region, practice type, and — naturally — age.

As I noted upon being sworn in as president of the conference, and in my first *Docket Call* newsletter article, Virginia young lawyers have been responsible for some of the most dramatic events in American history. This year, we will work to expanding the involvement of young lawyers beyond the YLC to the Virginia State Bar as a whole. We stand ready to serve.

Endnotes:

- 1 <http://www.abanet.org/women/CurrentGlanceStatistics2007.pdf>
 - 2 <http://www.abanet.org/minorities/publications/milessummary.html>
 - 3 *See id.*
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