

MINI DIVERSITY CONCLAVE IN LAFAYETTE A SUCCESS

The LSBA partnered with the Greater Lafayette Chapter of the Louis A. Martinet Legal Society, Inc. and the Lafayette Bar Association to host a FREE Mini Diversity Conclave in Lafayette on October 14, 2009, at the Lafayette Bar Association office to an audience of about 50 attorneys and judges.

Kelly McNeil Legier (director, Member Outreach and Diversity, Louisiana State Bar Association) gave an introductory presentation regarding the scope of diversity. She likened people to an iceberg, explaining “On the surface, you only see 10% of what makes up a person. Ninety percent of what makes a person diverse lies far beneath.” Ms. Legier had the audience identify primary dimensions of diversity, which are the physical characteristics you immediately see, such as race, age, gender, size. Ms. Legier continued, “There also are secondary dimensions of diversity, which are the person’s characteristics and background that you cannot see.” The audience identified many secondary diverse characteristics, such as personal experiences, sexual orientation, education, economic levels, parental status, and class. The audience then discussed how the secondary dimensions of diversity benefit a firm or organization by providing new ideas, new perspectives, new problem solving methods, and networking resources.

Hon. Jules D. Edwards, III (Louisiana Fifteenth Judicial District Court) moderated a panel discussion that continued the diversity discussion, focusing on the business case for diversity. The panelists included: Michael C. Garrard (partner, Kean, Miller, Hawthorne, D’Armond, McCowan & Jarman, LLP), Nannette Jolivette Brown (special partner, Chaffe McCall, LLP), and Hon. Ulysses G. Thibodeaux (chief judge, Louisiana Third Circuit Court of Appeal). They explained that diversity is important to a firm’s financial bottom line because many clients are demanding that firms diversify and are firing firms that refuse. They also explained that firms lose credibility with judges and juries if they lack meaningful diversity, where diverse members of the firm are actively involved in the proceeding.

Ms. Jolivette Brown explained that making the business case for diversity is easier today than when she began practicing law over 20 years ago. “Nowadays, most corporate clients insist upon a diverse team of people working on their matters and in fact expect firms to fill our forms identifying women and minority attorneys and explaining the role they play in the firm and will play in the matters the client expects to send to the firm. The reason they do this is simple: diversity in people usually means diversity in thought which makes for better problem-solvers. Additionally, if the matter in one to be litigated before a judge or jury, the trial team is a representation of the client and most clients want to appear as a reflection of the community it solicits business from or see itself as serving, in such situations. Therefore, if you are not diverse in the makeup of your organization you are missing out on substantial business opportunities.”

A networking social followed the discussion. Participants were able to generate individual diversity dialogue to continue the conversation begun during the mini conclave. The LSBA hopes to partner with the Lafayette Bar Association and the Lafayette Martinet Society to plan future diversity workshops and presentations in the Lafayette area.