

THE DAILY RECORD

LAW, REAL ESTATE, FINANCE AND GENERAL INTELLIGENCE SINCE 1908

Diversity Conference:

A Closer Look At Diversity Initiatives

BY NORA A. JONES,
DAILY RECORD CORRESPONDENT

Nixon Peabody LLP was one of the founding members of the Greater Rochester Diversity Council that organized the three-day Diversity Conference 2004.

When GRDC was formed in 1996, the law firm was involved in the area's first conference on workforce diversity, along with many other national, local and international companies.

Nixon Peabody

Long before joining the GRDC, Nixon Peabody established the William McKnight Scholarship Fund in honor of the first African-American partner at the firm. The fund awards a scholarship to one African-American student each year, presented at the Urban League's Salute to Black Scholars dinner.

Part Five Of Five

The firm also sponsors a moot court competition at Cornell Law School, in honor of McKnight.

In August 2002, Nixon Peabody launched a firm-wide "Diversity Initiative," seeking to create innovative solutions to address issues of law firm diversity in a manner that assists in recruiting and retaining top minority attorneys and generating business from new and existing clients.

Firm CEO Harry P. Truehart, III is truly the driving force behind the committee, which is made up of members from the Rochester, Washington D.C., New York City, San Francisco and Boston offices.

"Diversity is part of the firm's strategic plan," said Maggie Clemens, a Rochester attorney who is active on the NP Diversity Action Committee.

The firm's commitment has been recognized with various awards, including the 2004 President's Award from the National Bar Association, presented by immediate past president Clyde Bailey, in recognition of the substantial contributions the firm made to the success of the NBA during Bailey's presidency.

In 2003, the Albany County Bar Association awarded the firm a certificate of merit for the outstanding support and commitment the firm provided to the Diversity Internship Program, which was initiated in the fall of 2000. The goal of the Diversity Internship Program is to link law students of color to private practice firms. Since its inception, the program has placed over 70 minority law students from Albany Law School of Union University in selected law firms for six-week paid internships.

The Minority Corporate Counsel Association acknowledged the efforts of Nixon Peabody's Labor and Employment Group at the 2003 annual dinner, when John Hancock's general counsel

commended the firm for its partnership with John Hancock in a summer associates program.

Several of the firm's partners have written articles about diversity that have been published in the *New York State Bar Association Journal*, the *Diversity & The Bar* (the journal of the MCCA) and other nationally distributed publications.

A new resource to help colleges and universities with issues of recruiting and admitting a diverse student body in the wake of the University of Michigan cases was authored by Nixon Peabody partners Arthur Coleman and Scott Palmer. *Diversity in Higher Education: A Strategic Planning and Policy Manual Regarding Federal Law in Admissions, Financial Aid and Outreach*, is a plain-language, common-sense tool for institutional self-assessment.

"We have had mentoring programs and core competency training in place locally to retain associates," stated Clemens. "We have added various forums to our recruiting regime, including the Lavendar Law Career Fair [an event sponsored by the National Gay and Lesbian Bar Association] and we continue to set more ambitious goals year after year."

Thomson West

With an international workforce of some 18,000 employees, it is perhaps surprising to learn that Thomson West is still working on articulating its diversity strategy. However, the local offices (f/k/a Lawyers Cooperative Publishing Co. and employing about 600 currently) have actually been quite progressive. Some 15 Thomson employees attended the recent conference.

Tracey Dow from the human resource department in Rochester, sits on the GRDC board of directors. The local Thomson office also supports two employee resource groups focused on multicultural issues (MERGE) and gay, lesbian, transgender issues (OUTWest). Similar employee resource teams are in place at other Thomson locations.

"The purpose of the employee resource groups is to assist human resources in our goal of retention, development, recruitment and climate," stated Sandy Harris, senior director of global diversity for the company. "Such employee groups can help us be aware of external relations, identify diverse suppliers, and serve as focus groups for leadership teams to test ideas."

Harris is located in the company's Minnesota office, but came to Rochester to attend the three-day conference.

"This was perhaps the best organized diversity conference I've ever attended," stated Harris, who has prior career experience at General Mills and Cargill. "The sessions ran smoothly, the speakers were high quality, and the programs were relevant."

Continued ...

THE DAILY RECORD

LAW, REAL ESTATE, FINANCE AND GENERAL INTELLIGENCE SINCE 1908

Continued ...

She added the conference helped to confirm that much of what Thomson is doing is aligned with the best practices discussed by nationally recognized diversity practitioners.

"At the end of the day, our goal is to leverage the full capacity of our workforce for optimal business results," Harris concluded.

In addition to human resource personnel, Thomson had a wide variety of employees and managers attending the conference. Each attendee was given a questionnaire to help them capture key learning points to bring back and share with their organization.

Harter, Secrest & Emery

"Law firms by nature generate a stratified environment," explained Paul Holloway, Harter, Secrest & Emery partner who chairs the firm's Diversity Committee. "You have partners and associates that tend to be distinct groups, legal staff and support staff that also form their own segments. When we created the Diversity Committee, we purposely included partners, associates, paralegals and support staff to ensure we focused on a team approach."

Holloway said the committee grew out of an evaluation provided by a diversity consultant the firm hired to evaluate the firm. Since the committee has been in place, another consultant was contracted to take a cultural audit.

"The committee wished to take stock of where we are — not just in terms of raw numbers — but as an open culture," Holloway said. "Studies show that a diverse team scores higher on problem-solving than individuals working on the same problem one at a time."

HS&E had six members of the firm at the Diversity Conference, including Diversity Committee member Theresa Conroy.

"It was so interesting to hear the different speakers, many who were themselves members of minority groups," said Conroy. "The session titled 'Acting More Like An Immigrant' included a powerful exercise. You know, the kind where a drawing is shown to the whole group and they ask who sees the duck and who sees the bunny. The presenter related this to how diverse individuals see things differently, and because of cultural background or experiences, it may be very difficult for the 'duck' group to see 'the bunny.' Try as I might, I couldn't find the bunny."

"All of the programs were well worth the time," she continued. "Ideas and materials brought back from various sessions will help us in our firm wide diversity education program."

Conroy is a partner in the firm's Labor and Employment Group and she serves on the firm's Hiring Committee.

"Because the program had so many practical models and good nuts and bolts advice, I feel I have much to share with my department, the Diversity Committee and the Hiring Commit-

tee," she concluded.

Holloway, who works in the firm's Employee Benefits group, acknowledged the goal is to build a culture where all people feel welcome and valued, "and the numbers will follow. We are still in the early stages of our endeavor, and there are additional challenges of competing with compensation structures in larger cities, but we are committed to diversity as an integral part of our strategic plan."

For several years now, HS&E has participated in the BLSA Job Fair (Black Law Students Association).

"We interviewed 15 students in one day last time I was there," Conroy added.

Rochester Commission On Race And Ethnicity

The Diversity Conference included a workshop about the Biracial Partnerships Program initiated by Mayor William Johnson in 2001. Speaking on behalf of the local program were Diane Garga and Miguel Rivera.

"The foundation of the program is to build trust," explained Garga. "Trust is the foundation of any cultural change."

The first phase of Rochester's Biracial Partnerships Program paired 160 community leaders with people from different cultural backgrounds. All participants gathered for an orientation session and participated in quarterly "cluster" meetings. For example, Danny Wegman was paired with Wade Norwood from Rochester City Council.

"If we aren't taken out of our normal routine, it is very easy to never change," said Rivera in describing the program. "How do we change if we won't take time to share and grow?"

A questionnaire was used to match potential areas of interest, but the partners were set up from different professions to avoid a purely work-related relationship. Each pair had to agree to meet approximately 12 times within a year, and most of the participants from the 2001 initiative continued to have contact well beyond their one-year commitment.

Phase two of the project focused on pairing Muslims with non-Muslims, to build understanding and trust in a population that became increasingly suspect after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

In 2003, phase three of the program invited more than 150 middle managers to the table to repeat the partnering process.

"The original goal was to have 30,000 people participate by 2010," Garga stated. "We are on our way to making that happen and the results so far show unanticipated initiatives for economic development among these newly former partners."

Mayor Johnson was unable to be at the Diversity Conference as he was in Greensboro, N.C. to help launch a race relations project modeled after the Rochester program. Working with Greensboro Mayor Keith Holliday, the new initiative was organized to follow a similar plan, starting first with established community leaders and ultimately pairing members of the general public.