

Experts say recruitment not final step in boosting ranks of minority lawyers

Wednesday, June 13, 2007

By Joyce Gannon, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Hiring more women and minorities won't necessarily diversify law firms. Firms need to follow up by providing mentoring and networking opportunities for those new lawyers to truly achieve inclusion and diversity.

That's according to Arin Reeves, a Chicago-based attorney who runs a consulting firm that specializes in diversity in the legal profession. "White males don't have to work at being part of the network; they are the network," Ms. Reeves said during a panel discussion at the University of Pittsburgh on how to attract and retain minority law students and lawyers in Pittsburgh .

Ms. Reeves was among the national and local speakers at the one-day event sponsored by Pitt's School of Law and the Center on Race and Social Problems.

Minorities account for only 5 percent of partners and 17 percent of associates at law firms nationwide, according to the National Association of Law Placement, and the numbers are even worse in Pittsburgh, with minorities comprising only 1.49 percent of law firm partners and 8.7 percent of associates, said Mary Crossley, dean of Pitt's law school.

"Pittsburgh is way below the national average," she said. "There's a long way to go before a critical mass of minority lawyers call Pittsburgh home."

At Pitt's law school, minority enrollment is 14 percent -- "well below where we want to be," Ms. Crossley said.

To generate more interest in legal education and careers among minorities, law schools should reach out to potential recruits as young as middle- and high-school students or children in neighborhood youth organizations, said Peter Alexander, dean at the Southern Illinois University School of Law.

Once law schools recruit minorities, "We often have too few students and faculty of color to serve as mentors. That's a problem we share with law firms."

He cautioned against putting too much stock in the widely read national rankings of the best law schools published annually by news magazine U.S. News and World Report.

"Unfortunately, too many law schools are run by U.S. News & World Report. But I confess, I have a copy in my desk drawer," admitted Mr. Alexander.

Many diversity training programs at law firms aren't effective, said Ms. Reeves, because "you can't train people to think differently in two hours."

With her own clients, she tries to promote "dialogue" about race and gender issue.

"The best dialogues are where internal people facilitate it rather than an outside consultant where people will put on their best [politically correct] faces and say the right things."

One tactic Ms. Reeves uses to promote frank discussions about diversity is to show movies such as "Crash," the 2005 award-winning drama set in Los Angeles. "It throws a bunch of racial stereotypes at you," she said.

First published on June 12, 2007 at 7:07 pm

Joyce Gannon can be reached at jgannon@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1580.