

Leadership Council on Legal Diversity promotes mission in legal community nationwide

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By Joyce Gannon / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Since his undergraduate days, Dotun Obadina, an associate in K&L Gates' Pittsburgh office, has calmly navigated situations as a minority.

An African-American who grew up in a mixed-race community just outside Minneapolis, Mr. Obadina landed at North Dakota State University, Fargo, where he sometimes wrote for the school newspaper about diversity -- "or the lack thereof," as he put it.

After college, a Milwaukee law firm recruited him to work and paid part of his tuition at Marquette University's law school so that he could "infuse diversity in the Milwaukee" legal community, he said.

Last month, he began a one-year appointment as a fellow of the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity, a program that provides training and mentoring for young, promising lawyers whose employers believe have strong potential to become diverse leaders in the legal industry throughout the country.

He was nominated to the fellows' program by Peter Kalis, chairman of K&L and a member of LCLD. K&L is one of two Pittsburgh law firms that belong to the organization, which was founded in 2009 and includes 215 law firm managing partners and corporate chief counsels. Reed Smith's chairman, Greg Jordan, is a member and was a founding board director.

In addition, two Pittsburgh-based Fortune 500 companies also are represented on LCLD through their general counsels: James Garraux of U.S. Steel, and Glenn Bost of PPG Industries.

Mr. Obadina, 27, does corporate law work at K&L, including transactions, mergers and acquisitions, securities and governance cases. Though mentors at his firm have helped ease his transition from Milwaukee, he believes that Pittsburgh, "obviously, like most cities, has got a ways to go" in building a truly diverse community for lawyers.

According to a 2012 survey by the National Association for Law Placement, based in Washington, D.C., minorities account for nearly 12.9 percent of lawyers at firms nationwide, up only slightly from 12.7 percent in 2011. Women accounted for 32.67 percent of all lawyers at the firms surveyed, barely an increase from 32.61 percent the prior year.

Minority women accounted for 6.32 percent of lawyers at firms surveyed, up from 6.23 percent in 2011.

In Pittsburgh, one of 42 cities presented in the association's data, minorities accounted for 2 percent of all partners and 8.9 percent of all associates. Women comprised 18.7 percent of all partners and 43.4 percent

of associates. Minority women fared the worst here, accounting for fewer than 1 percent of all partners and 5.3 percent of associates.

"Racial diversity is very tough for law firms," said Susan Yohe, managing shareholder of Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney's Pittsburgh office and chair of the diversity committee for the firm's 15 offices.

One of the problems that firms face in trying to attract minorities, she said, is heated competition for a small pool of racially diverse law school graduates.

In Pittsburgh, it's more challenging because the city's existing population base is not as diverse as other metropolitan markets where minorities might want to live and work.

"We have more success recruiting [racially diverse lawyers] in our offices in Miami, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and New York," Ms. Yohe said.

Among the initiatives Buchanan has undertaken to diversify its ranks is to assign "sponsors" to minority associates who are close to achieving shareholder, or partner, status.

The sponsors, Ms. Yohe said, assume "responsibility for nurturing these individuals into the next level. We provided the sponsors and formal training, including business development training and how to think like the owner of a law firm. We want to be attentive to what we saw as a gap: making sure they have the skills and training to get advanced in the firm."

While K&L and Buchanan, the first- and third-largest firms in Pittsburgh, respectively, declined to disclose statistics on diversity within their ranks, Reed Smith said minorities comprise about 15 percent of its 546 partners in the U.S. and 26 percent of its 449 U.S. associates. The firm has 1,700-plus attorneys in 25 offices worldwide.

Tyree Jones, partner in Reed Smith's Washington, D.C., office and the firm's director of global diversity and inclusion, said the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity evolved from a 2004 "call to action" for more diversity authored by Rick Palmore, then the chief legal officer of Sara Lee and now general counsel at General Mills.

Mr. Jones, general counsel for the council, said its fellows program is designed to help "those who have been recognized as exemplary practitioners [get] to the next level by building relationships and skills to do that with other experienced practitioners."

Specifically, the 160 fellows selected this year will participate in sessions that include in-person group conferences, virtual training programs and peer projects.

Reed Smith's 2013 fellow, Tiffany Thomas, is a senior associate in its San Francisco office who created a mentoring program for diverse associates in the firm's northern California offices. The firm credits that program with helping it win the 2013 Minority Corporate Counsel Association's Thomas L. Sager Award for the West Region. The award is named for the general counsel at DuPont who is considered to be a diversity pioneer.

Mr. Obadina attended his first group meeting with LCLD last month in Washington, D.C., and said the large group will also convene in September and in March 2014. In between, he plans to attend regional lunches with other fellows and with general counsels and managing partners "to talk about our experiences and how to lead in the community."

Mr. Jones has observed fellows from 2011 and 2012 taking it upon themselves to connect with each

other in various cities after the formal year-long program concludes. "They've continued to network ... so I think what it has accomplished is to connect a group of outstanding attorneys both at law firms and corporate law departments across the country."

Other LCLD initiatives designed to promote diversity among the next generation of legal professionals include a mentoring program for first-year law students and a scholars program in which first-year law students work closely with professionals at law firms and in-house legal departments.

K&L participates in all of them, said Valerie Jackson, firmwide director of diversity and inclusion who is based in Los Angeles. "It's a fantastic cross-organizational effort that benefits our lawyers who participate as well as the law students."

She described diversity efforts at K&L as a strategic issue that is as critical as client relationships.

"There is no silver bullet. We have to be willing to try ideas that work and try ideas that fail ... the only thing that is guaranteed not to work is throwing in the towel."

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