

SCBA committee unveils initiative aimed at increasing diversity

By Sarah E. Warren, Esq.

Sarasota County's legal community is far from diverse, with only a handful of African-American, Hispanic and Asian lawyers and a woeful lack of diversity on the bench. Part of the problem remains attitudes and awareness: Law firms still don't recognize the benefits of an inclusive workforce—nor the detriments associated with an exclusive one. On the other hand, firms that do express an interest in hiring lawyers of racial and ethnic diversity insist there aren't enough to hire.

A newly energized Diversity Committee of the Sarasota County Bar Association is hoping to change that dynamic by working both sides of the recruitment problem: by educating the legal community about the benefits of diversity while helping to eliminate some of the roadblocks to creating a diverse workforce.

"One of the responses we've received from larger firms in Sarasota is that there haven't been enough applicants. Hopefully, we can reverse that way of thinking," said Diversity Committee Co-Chair Shelli Freeland Eddie, a litigator with Dickinson & Gibbons, P.A.

To begin tackling the problem, Freeland Eddie and fellow chair, Louis Ursini, a litigator with Ruden McClosky, are meeting Nov. 9 with Hispanic and African-American student law associations at Stetson University College of Law in St. Petersburg. They plan to promote Sarasota as a quality place to live and work and to collect resumes that they'll make available to local law firms.

Freeland Eddie and Ursini believe that the recruitment problem is a problem of perception *and* reality: Young racially and ethnically diverse lawyers don't see Sarasota as a vibrant community in which to work and live. On the other hand, they recognize that the community tends to cater to retirees. That's why they're supporting a Chamber of Commerce Young Professionals Group effort to bring more contemporary acts and events to Sarasota's entertainment venues.

The Diversity Committee also hopes to get the message to the local legal community that hiring a diverse workforce is, as Ursini describes, "not only the right thing to do, but the right thing for business. "A lot of corporate clients are saying we want our law firms to reflect our company in terms of diversity," Ursini said, meaning they want a firm with members from diverse gender, ethnic, racial, religious and cultural backgrounds.

Ursini recounted a story told recently at a national bar conference: "A major restaurant employer fired its firm of 20 years because they just didn't get it. And that was how they said it—'just didn't get it.' "

His own firm, Ruden McCloskey, has made a commitment to diversity that includes providing legal scholarships and a full day of diversity training for all attorneys and staff. The firm has been recognized as one of the leading firms in the state for its commitment.

Besides recruitment, the Diversity Committee is focusing on how to assist racially diverse firms who have difficulty obtaining loans, and with recruitment, advertising and other business issues. The group plans to invite lenders to workshops to discuss various financial programs. "As we grow as a community, we need to identify the problems our colleagues face," Ursini said. "We have to recognize problems from different people's perspectives and work to break down those barriers."

Freeland Eddie, one of only eight African-Americans to graduate from the University of Kentucky College of Law in 1998, has experienced what it's like to be one of the few African-American lawyers in a community. She recalls the many times she was mistaken for a court reporter when she walked into a room to take a deposition. "In their perception, I couldn't be the attorney," she said.

Those perceptions will change once law firms begin to reflect the community at large, said Freeland Eddie. And when that happens, law firms will reap the benefits, not only in their bottom lines but in the effectiveness of their representation and in the meaningfulness of their community involvement.

Freeland Eddie emphasizes that, while recruiting more African-American attorneys to the Sarasota legal community is a priority of the committee, the committee's overall focus is on creating a more diverse legal environment that includes attorneys from all ethnic backgrounds, while addressing issues related to age, gender and disability. "If we want to be able to communicate on a business level with those from diverse backgrounds," she said, "we need to be able to communicate as colleagues."

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--Louis Ursini, Esq.