ABA President Headlines Mentoring Conference

Mentorship is touted as the key to diversity in the profession

BY TONY FLESOR
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American Bar Association president Paulette Brown made a return trip to Denver for the National Legal Mentoring Consortium Conference May 5-7.

The National Legal Mentoring Consortium was founded after two national mentoring conferences generated interest and the need for a national organization.

Denver’s conference, sponsored by national and local law firms and businesses, was a three-day opportunity for networking with speakers providing an introduction to mentoring for newcomers to advanced topics such as incorporating diversity and resilience as a part of mentoring.

The event focused on identifying keys to success for mentoring programs, choosing a format for programs, essentials for recruitment and preempting ethical questions.

Thursday night’s reception included remarks from NLMC chair Lori Keating and DU Sturm College of Law dean Martin Katz. Colorado Supreme Court Chief Justice Nancy Rice introduced Brown.

Katz said that he was fortunate to have experience early in his career working for an employer who saw it as its role to mentor young attorneys, something that is increasingly rare. He said it should be a focus in legal education to think about what’s good for newcomers to advanced professionals of other backgrounds get the support they need in order to succeed. Brown recognized that every successful attorney found that success through the help of others.

“Someone along the way has mentored me,” she said. “It’s incumbent upon me and others to pay it forward.”

She also stressed the importance of mentors recognizing the value of diversity, saying that being “colorblind” is not good — race, gender and sexual orientation are all different dimensions that need to be acknowledged.

Women of color are the least represented group in the legal profession, Brown said. The attrition rate for women of color is close to 100 percent. In order to make the law more accessible to women of color and attorneys of other backgrounds is to acknowledge implicit biases so that African American lawyers aren’t only mentored by other African Americans, or so that diverse attorneys aren’t only used to work with clients of a similar background.

Brown concluded her speech by high-lighting the financial results of successful mentorship as well, citing a study of 1,000 employees at Sun Microsystems that found not only were the mentees more successful, but the mentors were more likely to get promoted and receive pay raises as well. The study concluded that mentorship also had a strong impact on retention; the company saved more than $6 million that otherwise would have been spent on replacing and rehiring employees.

In a profession made up predominantly of white males, mentorship is seen as one of the keys to make sure young professionals of other backgrounds get the support they need in order to succeed. Brown recognized that every successful attorney found that success through the help of others.

Using that tool involves mentoring multiple mentees but also being aware of the fact that forced mentorship, as it often happens in law firms, is not useful. She said assigning a mentee to someone who doesn’t want to be a mentor is akin to forcing someone to have a child they do not want.

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