

# The Metropolitan Corporate Counsel<sup>®</sup>

www.metrocorp-counsel.com

Volume 13, No. 12

© 2005 The Metropolitan Corporate Counsel, Inc.

December 2005

## *Diversity – Law Firms*

# Mock Trials: Early Outreach To Future Lawyers In The Minority Community

Lynda A. Bennett

### LOWENSTEIN SANDLER PC

As corporate counsel continually stress the importance of diversity among their legal counsel, outside law firms are scrambling to recruit, mentor, and retain highly qualified minority attorneys for their legal teams. Recent studies have confirmed, however, that the ability to achieve diversity has become more difficult as applications from prospective minority law students have steadily declined during the last few years. This dilemma has forced large law firms to think “outside the box” to develop and enhance diversity both within their own organizations and the bar as a whole.

Lowenstein Sandler has approached this challenge from many different perspectives. Among the most rewarding has been our outreach efforts to area inner city school districts. For the past two years, our firm has sponsored a mock trial program for junior and senior students attending high schools in Newark, New Jersey. The students selected by the schools to attend the program are young men and women whom already have identified an interest in pursuing an education in the law and/or law enforcement. The purpose of the program is to introduce the students to the legal process and to encourage them to follow their dreams to pursue a legal career.

Each year, we have invited a different high school to our Roseland, New Jersey office and presented a mock trial of a case involving a high school student’s claim against his school district concerning its alleged failure to provide him with the skills necessary to function in the real world after graduation. We provide the students with a comprehensive view of the trial process. Our lawyers give opening statements, engage in direct and cross-examination of witnesses, introduce exhibits into evidence, make objections that are ruled on by a presiding Judge, and deliver closing arguments. Our

*Lynda A. Bennett is a Shareholder and Chair of Lowenstein Sandler PC’s Diversity Initiatives Committee.*



invited guests also have a prominent role in the program – they function as the jury.

We have been extremely impressed with the level of attention and seriousness that the students have brought to the process. Indeed, we have had the pleasure of watching the students bring their own personal experiences and opinions to bear on the facts of our case, just as a real jury would. To say the least, the jury deliberations have been robust and heated at times. For example, notwithstanding the natural inclination of students to side with the student-plaintiff in our fact pattern, many jurors have cast their votes based on important qualities such as personal responsibility and commitment to the education process. Moreover, several jurors, already exhibiting fine lawyering skills, have inquired whether they are permitted to craft alternative relief to the \$50,000 monetary damage award demanded by our plaintiff.

After the verdicts are rendered and delivered in “open court” by an elected jury foreperson, we make a short presentation about the different types of practice areas within our firm and the different career paths that have been pursued by our presenting attorneys. Many of the students particularly enjoy this aspect of our program because it allows them the opportunity to ask very practical and basic questions about how to get started along the career path that is right for them. Because most of those students will be the first in their family to go to college, let alone pursue a law degree, they do not have an alternative forum in which to ask these questions nor do they otherwise have the type of access to

attorneys provided by our program.

Indeed, last year, we were touched by one of the students who told us that he came to the program thinking that his only option after high school was to serve his country by entering the military; however, he was so inspired by our presentation that he was going to speak with his guidance counselor about becoming a lawyer. We told him that he could achieve both of his goals by serving as an attorney in the JAG corps. He was both surprised and thrilled that this kind of career path was open to him.

We have also learned that outreach efforts like the mock trial program create and facilitate partnering opportunities with the administrators of the school districts. Those administrators are working hard to keep the young people engaged and focused on pursuing higher education. The administrators are effusive in their praise for our reinforcement of their positive messages to the student body. And, of course, these school districts, which are perennially pressed for financial resources, are quite eager to accept our volunteerism and cost-free educational programming.

Lastly, engaging in outreach programs of this nature also allows the minority lawyers already working at Lowenstein Sandler to give back to their communities in a positive and meaningful way. Many of these lawyers come from similar backgrounds and are eager to inspire and mentor the younger generation. It is with great pride that they help foster a positive outlook and encourage those who have faced similar obstacles in their professional pursuits.

*Please email the author at [lbennett@lowenstein.com](mailto:lbennett@lowenstein.com) with questions about this article.*