

The Metropolitan Corporate Counsel®

www.metrocorpcounsel.com

Volume 14, No. 3

© 2006 The Metropolitan Corporate Counsel, Inc.

March 2006

Diversity – Law Firms

Meeting The Diversity Challenge With All The Right Stuff

The Editor interviews Lynda A. Bennett, Shareholder and Chair of Lowenstein Sandler PC's Diversity Initiatives Committee.

Editor: Ms. Bennett, you have been a part of the diversity initiative at Lowenstein since your arrival at the firm. For starters, would you tell us something about the culture at Lowenstein and the particular importance of diversity in that culture?

Bennett: The firm has always valued diversity. From the time of its founding in the 1960s, a commitment to diversity has been one of those core values that defined Lowenstein Sandler. We were actively recruiting, working to retain and promoting minority attorneys long before most firms recognized how important this is – important to their success, in addition to being the right thing to do – and the firm today is a result of those early efforts. Those efforts are best exemplified today by the newly inaugurated Attorney General of the State of New Jersey, Zulima Farber, who came to the firm as a young attorney, worked her way up through the ranks and has now made us extremely proud of her accomplishments.

Editor: Responsibility for the firm's commitment to diversity does not reside in a single committee but rather in three. That is unusual. Would you tell us about the mission of each of these committees?

Bennett: The Diversity Initiatives Committee is charged with evaluating the firm's existing policies and procedures with respect to things like recruiting, mentoring and quality of life issues and, if there is a need for improvement or revision, suggest-



Lynda A. Bennett

ing ways to make it happen. In addition, the committee is charged with developing initiatives that will connect the firm with networks which will permit our attorneys to participate in the activities of a variety of minority professional associations. This is meant to provide us with a forum for the discussion of what works and what does not, as well as a platform from which to showcase the firm and its accomplishments for a very special audience.

The Recruiting Committee is charged with reaching out to the very best people it can find, both recent law graduates and laterals, and bringing them to the firm. Through the Recruiting Committee, we introduce all of our attorneys to the tremendous opportunities and platform offered by the firm for both professional and personal growth.

Finally, the Associate Life and Training Committee is focused on what we can do to keep our attorneys happy and motivated

once they join the firm. This is essentially a retention function, and it covers a considerable area of activity. The committee evaluates whether associates have access to professional education and training, whether they are getting challenging and interesting work and, of course, whether the firm is providing them with the right balance of work and a pleasant social environment.

Editor: What led to the organization of the diversity initiative in this manner? There must be a story here.

Bennett: I think it reflects a recognition that even if you excel at something, you may not be able to accomplish your goals. That is, a firm may do a terrific job at recruiting young attorneys, but if it does not have a follow-up program to try to keep them happy after they have arrived, not much has been accomplished. Since any diversity initiative is concerned with the firm's long-term goals, it is essential to understand that recruiting is but one part of the equation. Achieving a diverse work environment, in our view, requires the coordination of a number of related but different initiatives: one directed at getting the best and brightest people through the door; another directed at providing the internal support that will keep them happy once they are on board; and a third directed at providing them, and the firm in general, with an outlet for marketing and networking opportunities. The firm's diversity initiative is also regarded as a means of giving back to the community, something that is very important to the morale of everyone at the firm.

Editor: Who are the members of these committees? Partners? Associates? Women and minorities?

Please email the interviewee at lbennett@lowenstein.com with questions about this interview.

Bennett: All of the above. We have made a conscious effort to give these committees a membership that is representative of the entire firm, and that membership runs from senior partners to entry-level associates, administrators at a variety of levels and a cross-section of women and minorities as well. We are anxious to have a diversity of views that reflects the diversity of our firm composition.

Editor: Why has the firm gone to such lengths to ensure that this initiative takes hold?

Bennett: We are building the Lowenstein Sandler of the future. To do so, we are drawing upon the firm's core values, on commitments that were made at the time of the firm's organization. We understand how well those commitments have served us over the years, and today – when diversity has become such an important issue for our clients – we are in the enviable position of having a structure in place that will enable us to meet all of their expectations on diversity. The things that we are doing today will ensure our leadership 30 years down the road.

Editor: It has been more than a year since we spoke about diversity. Are there any particular accomplishments that have taken place over this time that you would like to call to the attention of our corporate counsel readership?

Bennett: Our marquee accomplishment over this past year has been the recruitment of our summer class, which was comprised of 47% minorities and more than 50% women. We recruited this class mainly from the area law schools, and this year saw the launch of our Lowenstein Sandler Fellows Scholarship Program. There is a connection here, and a number of the people we were able to recruit for the summer class came to us through our Lowenstein Fellows process and related Diversity Initiatives Committee activities.

Editor: Do you personally go out and speak to student groups?

Bennett: I do. I have been personally involved in every initiative that we have undertaken in this regard. I also encourage the firm to hold as many events as possible at the firm for law students – it is a way of experiencing the firm's culture at first hand – and I participate in these events as well. There is nothing that can replace personal contact in an initiative of this kind.

Editor: The firm was recently named by

***Multicultural Law* magazine as the top New Jersey firm, and one of the best in the country, in terms of diversity. How does this kind of publicity help in, say, your recruiting efforts? Are law graduates aware of awards like this?**

Bennett: I think people are well aware of what we are doing even if they may not know of a specific award. Public recognition by way of such awards is a wonderful affirmation of our efforts and demonstrates our commitment to diversity to people within the firm and to some very specific audiences outside the firm. We have just won the MultiCultural Law 2005 Diversity Initiative Award For Extraordinary Commitment to Comprehensive Inclusion – an announcement appears on our website – and when I speak at an event it is gratifying to see that the law students have visited our website and are aware of the firm's diversity mission.

Editor: You mentioned the Lowenstein Sandler Fellows Scholarship Program. This is directed at minority students?

Bennett: Each year the firm awards two second-year minority law students a \$10,000 scholarship, which is renewable for their third year. We also extend them an offer to join our summer class as summer associates with full pay. The idea is really to reach out and develop a relationship with the absolutely top-of-the-line minority students early on in their legal careers and to integrate them into the firm culture as soon as possible. Last year was the first year for the program, and it was limited to Rutgers University School of Law – Newark and Seton Hall University School of Law, but our plan is to expand the program and extend it beyond these two schools in the near future.

Editor: With the changing demographics of our law school populations, I imagine recruiting qualified women to your ranks is not the challenge that it was, say, 20 years ago. Minorities are another matter. There are too few to go around, and everyone is competing for them.

Bennett: Everyone is competing for them, but we are in a very strong position to meet the competition. This is the result, of course, of a commitment to diversity that goes back many years. David Harris, who started at the firm as a summer associate in the mid-1970s, is today a partner and chair of the firm's 110-person litigation department. Just having David here constitutes a statement of what is possible in a Lowenstein career. We recruit from the national

law schools as well as from the area schools, and everywhere we go we invite people to look at our track record.

I should also mention that we conduct mock interview sessions for minority law students at a number of law schools. Essentially, this is a practice run – a 15-minute interview is followed by a 15-minute critique on the student's interviewing skills and resume. This is a very small thing, of course, but it is extraordinary how helpful it can be for someone who has never been coached through an interview process. These students tend to be very grateful for this support, and whether they come to us or not, they contribute to our reputation for diversity.

Editor: Please tell us about the firm's mentoring program. How does this work?

Bennett: The program has been in place for some time, although we are constantly working to improve it. At the moment, the program pairs an entry-level associate with a mid-level associate mentor, and the idea is for the veteran to teach the newcomer the ropes. When that person becomes a mid-level associate, he or she is paired with a partner and the discussion revolves around career development.

Editor: How do Lowenstein's clients feel about the firm's diversity efforts? Is this a value that you find you share with clients?

Bennett: Our clients are very enthusiastic about our diversity initiatives and accomplishments because diversity is certainly an important value within their business structures. Because of this shared commitment to diversity, one of the things we did last year was partner with our clients to provide a forum for discussion on leading diversity topics. For example, one client spoke to a group of our young minority attorneys about the many different mentoring relationships that are critical to a successful legal career. Given the positive response we received to this event, we are planning similar programs this year.

Editor: When we last spoke, you talked about the pipeline the firm was building. How is this evolving?

Bennett: I think it is evolving extremely well. In each of the last five years the firm has promoted either a woman or a minority attorney to partner, and our success in recruiting our latest summer associate class leads me to believe that the momentum is only going to accelerate as we move forward.