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Program Connects Diverse Attorneys With Legal Bigwigs

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During the past 16 months, Dorsey & Whitney partner Cassandra Headrick has rubbed elbows with some of the most powerful players in the legal profession: Wal-Mart Stores Inc. general counsel Karen Roberts; U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission Chairwoman Mary Jo White; Microsoft Corp. general counsel Brad Smith.

Headrick, who became a partner in 2010, wasn't just making small talk at a cocktail hour with these legal leaders. She was touring their legal departments, learning how they operate and picking up leadership advice.

"Karen Roberts from Wal-Mart had dinner with our group, and I was able to ask, 'What's your leadership philosophy?'" Headrick said of her visit last year to the company's Bentonville, Ark., headquarters.

The Wal-Mart visit and similar occasions were set up by the Leadership Council for Legal Diversity—an initiative spearheaded by law firm managing partners and general counsel to give women and minority attorneys and law students opportunities to network with industry decision-makers and develop leadership skills.

The council held its fourth annual member meeting on Thursday in Washington. The occasion offered its leaders the chance to take stock of their accomplishments thus far.

"We started with a vision, and four years later we've made a lot of progress turning that into reality," said Microsoft's Smith, who began his two-year stint as chairman during the gathering. "The vision is that the leaders of the profession would come together and really roll up their sleeves to make a difference when it comes to diversity for lawyers."

Creating a legal profession that tracks the diversity of the U.S. population will be a long-term task, but the council is already making a difference for the law students and attorneys who have participated in its programming, Smith said.

The signature program is dubbed LCLD Fellows. Member law firms and legal departments each year select one or two diverse attorneys from within their ranks who have displayed leadership potential. (Most have been out of law school for about 10 years by this time and are recent partners.) Those fellows spend the next year being mentored by top attorneys, attending leadership and networking functions and going on "learning experiences" like the Wal-Mart visit.

Headrick was a member of the 2012 class of LCLD fellows. The class wrapped up last spring, and the council has since welcome a new crop of 160 fellows. Altogether, 423 attorneys have completed or are in the fellows program.

"I don't think I fully appreciated all the opportunities it would offer," Headrick said. "It's really an extraordinary program. It's been one of the most professionally rewarding things I've done, mainly because of the other fellows themselves. I've never met so many highly qualified lawyers who are ambitious, talented and committed to the fellowship and mutual development."

Headrick said she believes the personal and professional connections she forged with other fellows will last throughout their careers.

The Council is aggressively adding programs intended to help foster diversity among law students, given that the relatively small percentage of minority law students creates a significant pipeline problem for an industry intent on becoming more inclusive, Smith said. Council leaders met with a dozen law school deans in July to discuss the situation.

"We know there are weak spots in law schools, and we know we're not getting a population in law school that's as diverse as

the country. We know we're not doing as well in moving law students from graduation into the bar," Smith said.

The council's fastest-growing initiative is its law student mentoring program. More than 2,800 attorneys in 30 cities across the country are paired with diverse law students.

The more intensive 1L LCLD Scholars program has grown from 57 first-year law students to 171 this summer. LCLD scholars spend the summer after their 1L year working at a member firm or legal department, are paired with a mentor and attend a summer retreat with other scholars.

Robert Saka, a 3L at the University of California Hastings College of the Law, was an LCLD scholar at Seattle firm Perkins Coie in the summer of 2012 and has parlayed that experience into an associate position after graduation.

"The access and networking opportunities were probably the most important part," Saka said. "This is a profession of relationships, but for the LCLD and other diversity initiatives, quite frankly, I wouldn't have access to some of these relationships and these players."

In addition to getting advice about how to succeed in the legal industry and be a leader, Saka said, he enjoyed learning how to build his own personal brand.

The council has no intention of slowing down its efforts and in fact is looking for additional member organizations, Smith said. "I hope we can use our voice as leaders in the profession, in a thoughtful way, to call attention more broadly to opportunities for improvement," he said. "We can definitely use all the help we can get."

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