

RETREATS *for* DIVERSE LAWYERS

By Patrick Folliard

RETREATS FOR DIVERSE ATTORNEYS AREN'T NEW. But in recent years they have grown in scope, size and inclusion. Once an afternoon seminar strictly for minorities, the diversity retreat has matured into something longer, bigger and more all-encompassing. Following are thoughts on retreats from some of the people who make them happen.

Jeremiah “Jerry” DeBerry is director of diversity and inclusion for Mayer Brown. A former private equity partner who now focuses solely on diversity, he sees the retreat as a key part of a broader mission to create and maintain a supportive and inclusive environment where all of the firm’s attorneys, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender or gender identity, have equal access to opportunities needed to reach their full potential.

In the spring, Mayer Brown’s diversity retreat took place over three days at the Four Seasons Hotel Chicago. “A retreat is designed to give attorneys the tools needed to succeed and more importantly to bring diverse attorneys together to be supportive of one another and their careers. But it’s also very important to include majority attorneys. If our diversity and inclusion initiatives are to be successful long term, it’s going to

take all of us, not just diverse attorneys, but diverse attorneys working with those in power, who tend to be straight white males.”

Throughout the retreat, speakers, panelists and award recipients included both minority and majority attorneys drawn from within and outside the firm. It was a time for diverse attorneys to learn more about the business of the profession and to become better acquainted with colleagues and firm leaders, including firm Chairman Paul Theiss, who attended parts of the program.

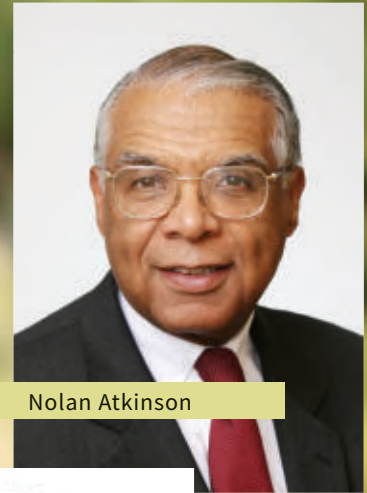
But some of the retreat time is reserved exclusively for diverse attorneys. “While we don’t want the retreat to be a gripe session,” says DeBerry, “it’s important to give both diverse associates and diverse partners a place to talk freely about what they’re experiencing at the firm.”



Jeremiah "Jerry" DeBerry



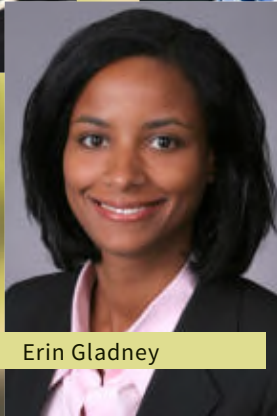
Quinncy McNeal



Nolan Atkinson



Catherine Mohan



Erin Gladney



Brent Clinkscale

Erin Gladney, a minority partner and co-chair of the Mayer Brown Black Lawyers Association, an affinity group in the firm's New York office, says, "Jerry has taken the retreat to a new level. Everyone was encouraged to attend. A lot of times associates are concerned about being away from their groups and their work for retreats, but for our March retreat the partners really made an effort to encourage everyone to attend, and both associates and partners took advantage of this opportunity.

"It's exciting to meet other diversity attorneys from other offices," she adds. "The March retreat was a great opportunity for internal networking. My practice area is tax controversy, and I met a lot of people who handle various employment issues for global relocation business, which is a growing area. Down the road if someone has a question about a tax issue I think they will be more likely to reach out to me because they know me in a personal way beyond my Internet bio."

Quinncy McNeal, a fifth-year associate in Mayer Brown's Houston office, where he's a member of the Associate Diversity Council, says, "My favorite part of the retreat was a session for associates that featured a panel of lawyers in general

counsel offices from large domestic and international corporations. "I'm a litigator. And GCs are the clients I work with, the clients whose burdens I proudly shoulder. In Chicago, these lawyers talked about what it takes to become a trusted advisor and adjunct arm of their businesses. They conveyed to us what they wanted from us and in turn what we needed to know to succeed in the profession."

Mayer Brown's retreat included a wide swath of diverse attorneys who differ in race, ethnicity, gender and gender expression. "Initially, participants cliqued off with those they knew from their offices," says McNeal, "but quickly as the retreat moved on, groups from one office would start talking to groups from other offices, and soon, everyone was engaged in a collective conversation. Fortunately, the participants were like-minded. We believe there should be a big tent in the law. We value viewpoints and expertise and were generally ready to embrace the differences within our group."

For Catherine Mohan, a majority partner at McCarter & English, the highlight of her firm's annual diversity retreat is the open forum. It gives an opportunity for diverse attorneys to really express their needs and concerns. "During a

forum several years ago, one of our associates expressed that as a minority associate in a really large practice group, having a mentor wasn't enough," explains Mohan, who is based in the firm's Hartford, Conn, office. "All young attorneys need someone looking out for them, someone who can show them the ropes. They need for the firm to like them and want them to be successful. With these things in mind, we developed our sponsorship program."

As sponsors, majority partners are assigned diverse associates with whom they will work directly with until they make partner. The sponsor's responsibilities include making sure the associate receives opportunities and is assigned interesting work.

Mohan is McCarter & English's first female treasurer and a member of its management committee. She is also the liaison to the firm's diversity committee, a responsibility she takes very seriously. "There is a great need out in the world for diverse lawyers, and there is a limited pool of talent. For eight years I worked directly with a minority associate who would have surely made partner at McCarter, but a huge multi-national corporation gave him an incredible opportunity, and off he went. Big companies take partners and make them general counsel, and government is also looking for diverse lawyers. Through retreats and the sponsorship program, we're striving to keep minority attorneys at the firm."

Brent Clinkscale, a partner and diversity committee chairman in Womble Carlyle's Greenville, S.C., office says the firm strives to make diversity a part of every retreat. "Whether it's a retreat or workshop for partners, associates, the management committee, business litigation or the corporate group, we interweave diversity and inclusion into the program."

Earlier this year, the firm's management committee retreat included a mini-diversity retreat led by diversity consultant Verna Myers. In March, a broader leadership meeting that included practice group leaders, office managing partners and chairs of various firm committees similarly included a mini-diversity retreat led by Myers. And more recently at The Greenbrier in West Virginia, at a retreat for firm leaders and diversity committee members, the spotlight was shone on diversity initiatives and how best to spread them throughout the firm.

Clinkscale says Womble Carlyle strives to retain more lawyers of color, make sure that women can become partners and move into leadership positions, and ensure the firm is a place where all lawyers can work comfortably and be successful. Womble Carlyle's partnership is demonstrating that commitment by recently announcing leadership changes that include minority and female lawyer promotions: Kevin Lyn assumed the role of mechanical team leader of the Intellectual Property Practice Group; Deborah Israel was selected as the firm's chief operating partner; and Elizabeth "Betty" Temple was elected as the firm's first female chair-elect. Temple, a long-time Womble Carlyle Corporate and

Securities partner, will assume the firm's top leadership role on Jan. 1, 2016. In addition, the Human Rights Campaign has awarded Womble Carlyle a perfect score of 100 for the firm's support of equal rights for LGBT Americans.

"We work hard to engage our diverse attorneys in diversity and inclusion initiatives. We have leadership from the top that's supportive," he adds. "It's important to get practice group leaders and supervising partners involved. Those are the lawyers making day-to-day transactions. They give work; they take away work. They hire; they fire."

Nolan Atkinson, a partner and chief diversity at Duane Morris, says, "Our diversity and inclusion retreats are primarily focused on diverse attorneys, but inclusion is the direction we're going. To have true inclusion we need transparent programs that everyone can understand so we want to make sure what is done at a diversity retreat can be viewed by anyone in the firm or discussed during a panel presentation at a firm meeting."

This spring, Duane Morris's annual two-day retreat was held in Philadelphia. It kicked off Friday afternoon with the George B. Vashon Lecture, named for an African-American who was denied entry to the Pennsylvania bar because of his color. Through Atkinson's effort Vashon was posthumously admitted in 2010. The lecture features legal luminaries who talk about equal justice and civil rights. This year's guest speaker was Wendell Pritchett, interim dean at University of Pennsylvania Law School.

With many practice group leaders and office heads in attendance, Duane Morris's annual retreat gives diverse attorneys the opportunity to have substantive and social conversations with firm leadership. "There is no distinction among the attendees during the meetings. You might sit next to the firm chairman or with another associate," says Atkinson. "Participants can express themselves on various issues and get a sense of what is important in the firm. Similarly, the firm's leadership sees what a fantastic group of diverse attorneys we have working here."

Back to Mayer Brown's Jerry DeBerry: "Bringing attorneys from across the country to the Four Seasons in Chicago is not an inexpensive proposition. Our partners and the chairman had to be behind the retreat 100 percent, and they were. This is something we'll do every other year."

Ultimately, says DeBerry, retreats are about arming diverse attorneys with what they need to succeed. The other part of the equation, he adds, is making sure white, straight males in the firm understand their role and responsibility in making these associates successful, too.

"For the firm to succeed, we need to involve all our attorneys." ■

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