

MAKING STRIDES

Dedicated to diversity: Progress seen in legal profession

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In 1989, Buffalo attorney David Edmunds started to take a keen interest in diversity in the legal profession.

A lawyer at Damon Morey and with the New York State Department of Law at the time, he got a chance to work with the state Bar Association's Committee on Minorities. Shortly after, he helped form a special task force with the American Bar Association that wanted to create more opportunities for minority attorneys.

That spawned an attorney access program which saw government agencies and 20 local law firms agree to participate in an initiative intended to identify minority attorneys and then recruit, hire and retain them.

Similar programs are still in existence. Is the need as strong as it once was? Maybe not. But Edmunds said the fact that such programs are still around tells him that there's still a way to go.

Edmunds recently was part of an eight-attorney panel that addressed the state of diversity in the legal profession locally and beyond. The Jan. 6 event was hosted by Goldberg Segalla, with the Buffalo Law Journal and Business First moderating.

Equity partners in multi-tier law firms continue to be disproportionately white men, according to the National Association of Law Placement. NALP data shows that in 2013, 16.5 percent of equity partners nationwide were women and 5.4 percent were minorities. Though Buffalo seems to be ahead of the curve, the panelists said, they see the need for continued efforts to build up those numbers.

"We have come a long way from where we were back in 1989," said Edmunds, now deputy commissioner in Buffalo for the New York State Liquor Authority. "Most of us sitting at these tables have had the opportunity to be employed at Buffalo's biggest and most prestigious law firms.

"We've come a long way as far as our participation as attorneys in government, not-for-profit and even



Goldberg Segalla partner Joseph Hanna, foreground, chairs the firm's Diversity Task Force. Joining him on the panel were, from left, Jennifer Kimura of Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Chris Hayes of M&T Bank and Jessica Lazarin of the Volunteer Lawyers Project.

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in increasing the number of judges of color. So I'm pleased with where we have come from and where we are, but there's still more work to be done."

Joseph Hanna, a partner at Goldberg Segalla who chairs the firm's Diversity Task Force, counts on the Minority Bar Association of Western New York and the MBAWNY Foundation as vehicles for this effort. He heads national committees promoting inclusion and diversity in various professions.

"We speak among ourselves a lot and we all come up with many great ideas and accomplish great things in our community, but I think we need more of an effort to publicize what we do, our potential struggle and issues that are actually there in order to move everything forward," Hanna said.

In the public sector for most of his legal career, David State said he has worked to promote diverse hiring practices.

"As the organizations that are doing the hiring appreciate the value of diversity more and more, you will hopefully see this trend not only sustain but facilitate into the future," said State, NFTA general counsel and former assistant state attorney general. "We see the benefit of not only being diverse internally but also hiring in a diverse way, especially for a public organization."

Jessica Lazarin of the Erie County Bar Association's Volunteer Lawyers Project said programs established locally and nationally are the direct result of problems seen in the legal profession. For instance, when the growth rate of minority students at law schools was deemed to be too low in 2008, the response was to create pipeline programs, she said.

Among them: a program to encourage minorities to pursue a legal career by conveying a sense of what law school is all about. The Minority Bar Association of Western New York partnered with area colleges and SUNY Buffalo Law School on a task force to form the Prelaw Undergraduate Scholars Program, funded through the Law School Admission Council.

As 2011 president, Hanna led the WNYMBA in establishing a clerkship program for minority law

school students and forming a large law firm initiative to create internships.

"Both programs have taken off," he said. "We've worked with other large cities and helped implement some of these programs to teach them what we've accomplished in Western New York."

A product of Buffalo City Schools, Chris Hayes, an attorney with M&T Bank, said it's critical for students to see examples of the heights they can reach.

Hayes visits public schools to meet students and discuss his career path.

"A lot of kids here may see lawyers on TV but they have no idea how to get there," he said. "Then they see you're a lawyer and assume you did all sorts of Herculean tasks to get there. But when you sit down with them, you can let them know that you are just like them and came from where they are."

Attorney outreach efforts can make a difference, according to Jennifer Kimura, an attorney with Housing Opportunities Made Equal.

The sooner you make contact with students not only in regard to the legal profession but also in such fields as medicine, architecture and engineering, the better, said Stephanie Saunders. She is assistant counsel for the Buffalo Board of Education.

"It's important that we always try to lift as we climb," said Stephanie Calhoun, assistant state attorney general and past president of the WNYMBA who recently was named head of the Minority Outreach Committee for the Erie County Bar Association. "So any way that I can help a student or another fellow attorney, even if it's just having a conversation, I think that can be instrumental in getting them to think about something, whether that's diversity, non-related or job-related."

Edmunds, meanwhile, said he sees a solid effort by the Minority Bar and other bar associations to create opportunities.

"It's our job to keep this discussion going until we're all satisfied both qualitatively and quantitatively that the profession is truly diverse," Edmunds said.



David Edmunds of the state Liquor Authority, left, and Stephanie Saunders of the Buffalo Board of Education. "We have come a long way from where we were back in 1989," says Edmunds.

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