

We Have a Responsibility Too

By Imoh E. Akpan



The murder of George Floyd and the protests that followed are seminal moments in our nation's history. I am truly amazed at the progress that this movement has made not only on systemic issues, like policing of Brown

and Black communities, but also forcing a national conversation on race. It was only three short years ago that Colin Kaepernick was "blackballed" by the NFL for taking a knee during the national anthem. Today, the NFL, NBA, NHL, and MLB have co-opted the symbolism of the "Black Lives Matter" movement and encouraged their players to take a knee and speak out about race and policing.

The question must be asked, Where are the similar upheaval and race consciousness in the legal profession?

The late John Lewis said, "You have to tell the whole truth, the good and the bad, maybe some things that are uncomfortable for some people." The uncomfortable and complete truth about the legal profession is that we, as a community, have failed to expand the legacy of those law-

yers, like Thurgood Marshall, who fought to bring about change that desegregated schools and ensured protection for civil rights and voting rights. In 2001, Black/African Americans constituted less than 2 percent of all law firm partners (1.28 percent) and less than 5 percent of all law firm associates (4.37 percent). Two decades later, these percentages have barely changed. Black/African Americans constitute less than 2 percent of all law firm partners (now 1.97 percent) and less than 5 percent of all law firm associates (now 4.76 percent).

I do not pretend to think that corporate general counsel or law firm managing partners and executive committees will have a change of consciousness as swift as the NFL, NBA, NHL, or MLB. But we must ask ourselves, *What can we do as individual lawyers to bring about the change that is so desperately needed?*

Again, I borrow from the life of the late John Lewis. After graduating from high school, the 17-year-old wrote a letter to Martin Luther King Jr. asking for his help in

applying for admission to segregated Troy State University. To his surprise, Dr. King not only wrote back but sent him a bus ticket to meet him in Montgomery, Alabama. John Lewis said that meeting with Dr. King changed his life.

As DRI members and leaders in the legal defense industry, we can increase and improve the opportunities for lawyers from underrepresented backgrounds. Four years ago, I was a newly minted partner trying to figure out the unknown that is business development. I signed up for the planning committee for the DRI Diversity for Success Seminar and was invited to a fly-in meeting. My first DRI Diversity fly-in meeting changed my professional career. I met so many dynamic leaders, who were not only committed to the cause of diversity and inclusion but

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were committed to each other's professional development. During the meeting, Stacy Douglas gave me the opportunity to be the Dine-Around chair for the upcoming seminar. I also met soon-to-be DRI President Toyja Kelley, who I am proud to call my mentor and friend.

One contact, one invitation, one meeting can inspire and change a professional career. The kindness and graciousness of a few have opened doors and opportunities for me. If we want to see change and more opportunities for lawyers from underrepresented backgrounds, we all have a role to play and a responsibility to pay forward the opportunities that were bestowed on us.

So how do we bring about this change. Get involved. Become a mentor and a resource for a law student or young lawyer. There are many young and aspiring lawyers, especially from underrepresented backgrounds, looking for professional mentors. You can help them develop their professional networks. For the last four years, I have served as a co-chair of the annual gala for the University of Baltimore's Fannie Angelos Program for Academic Excellence. The program is designed to identify talented minority students, help them gain admittance to law school, support them through law school, and help them find jobs upon graduation. I also participate in the

University of Baltimore's Black Law Student Association's Interviewing and Networking Event. I continue to make myself available for questions and even lunch. Participating in these initiatives has not only been personally rewarding for me but also for the young law students and lawyers I have met.

Whatever you choose to do, be available and pay it forward.

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