

Kirkland & Ellis' Diversity Conference Is Just the Start

By Jennifer Williams-Alvarez

At 8:30 a.m. on April 8, as New Yorkers hustled from subway stations to their offices, 30 law students navigated their way to Kirkland & Ellis' midtown office for a daylong conference. Several hours earlier, these same 30 law students could be found networking at a bar just a few blocks down. But this wasn't a typical networking event, and these weren't just any 30 law students. They were selected from over 350 applicants, and they were flown in from Texas, California, Michigan—all over—for Kirkland's first annual 1L Diversity Scholars Program.

After a welcome breakfast, the students were ushered into a conference room where Sandra Leung, general counsel at Bristol-Myers Squibb, gave the keynote address. Leung's resume includes eight years in the Manhattan district attorney's office. She was also the first woman hired by the litigation department at Bristol to make it more than six months, and the only person of color on the leadership team there. She had every right to act entitled.



Pictured, from left, are Kirkland & Ellis partner Eunu Chun; Bettina Clark, assistant general counsel at Verizon; and Lisa LeCointe-Cephas, senior counsel at Bristol-Myers Squibb.

Instead, though, she introduced herself while deciding she'd prefer to pace down among the students rather than deliver her speech up on a stage, from behind a podium.

This decision, minor as it may have been, perfectly illustrated the tone of this event. All 40 Kirkland lawyers who filtered in and out of the room throughout the day, as well as the 20

in-house attorneys from companies such as Verizon Communications Inc. and Accenture Public Ltd. Co., made it clear they were there to connect with and help these students.

Leung emphasized that diversity is key to a company's success. "The companies that do well are the companies that create an environment of inclusion where people don't have to

hide who they are,” she said. And for it to truly work, a company can’t stop at just hiring a diverse attorney. “Diversity inclusion is not just about bringing people in, but it’s also about nurturing their careers,” she added.

This idea of nurturing careers really highlighted what made this conference different for Kirkland. The firm brought together the students and attorneys to talk about changing the diversity landscape in the legal profession. Even more important, though, was its goal of fostering a continuing relationship between students and attorneys beyond one conference.

After Leung’s talk, the students heard from attorneys on topics such as diverse paths in the law and diversity within the firm. And each had a common theme: That diversity is important for the growth of the legal profession and that Kirkland is implementing programs with this in mind. While dining on Chilean sea bass and beef tenderloin, the students heard from six lawyers about the lengths the firm is willing to go in order to promote diversity. “There is not a policy for the firm that is not reviewed for diversity and inclusion,” said partner Atif Khawaja.

Amid the conversation on classes—Contracts was going well, Civil Pro was not—and commentary on Kirkland’s Lexington Avenue office—“There’s unlimited Listerine in the bathroom!”—it was not uncommon to hear talk about how fortunate each student felt to have this opportunity.

Samantha Rose, who attends Cornell Law School, said that she felt incredibly “lucky to be able to participate in the program.” She said that, for her, what made this program attractive, more than just the quality of the firm, was the focus on diversity. “I was enticed by the fact that they were being proactive about diversity because that’s important to me,” Rose said. “To see that the big firms are also now looking, and making an effort, and see the value in diverse perspectives and diverse experiences is really great,” she added.

It’s no secret that the legal profession has struggled in this area. According to the National Association for Law Placement (NALP), for example, in 2015 less than 8 percent of partners were minorities among the firms on NALP’s Directory of Legal Employers. Similarly, statistics from the American Bar Association reveal that as of 2010, 88 percent of all lawyers were white.

The question that often follows when numbers like these come out is how to fix it. Kirkland’s response has been to launch programs such as the Diversity Fellowship Program, which since 2004 has provided sponsorship to more than 140 Diversity Fellows with grants totaling more than \$2.5 million. Fellowship participants are second-year students who submit a personal statement illustrating their efforts to promote diversity in the legal profession. The firm also has several committees and subcommittees dedicated to the same task.

And while these efforts are certainly commendable, the big question is whether they are working. Going back to 2012, Kirkland has remained in the top 50 firms in The American Lawyer’s diversity rankings. These measure minority representation at Am Law 200 and National Law Journal 250 law firms employing 154 lawyers or more for a particular year.

And according to numbers provided by Kirkland, as of Feb. 1, a little more than 10 percent of the U.S. partners identify as a minority (which includes those who identify as African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic, and multiracial). Compared with NALP’s number of less than 8 percent, Kirkland is doing marginally better. The same study from NALP also reveals that almost 21.5 percent of partners were women, while Kirkland comes in at around 22 percent.

So overall, the firm’s numbers aren’t really shocking on either end of the spectrum. They could be better, and they could also be a lot worse. But the 1L Diversity Program has a couple of things going for it that make it different than other programs at the firm.

One is the focus on diversity inclusion from very early on. This program is not about preparing 3Ls for a job or placing them at Kirkland, though that might be something that comes down the line. Instead, it’s about showing 1L students that yes, there is a struggle when it comes to diversity inclusion, but there are also people who are trying to make that easier, if possible. Kirkland’s

goal was to figure out how to “make a real impact in the early pipeline of diverse students,” said Kirkland partner Cheryl Kaeser. And this 1L program was what they came up with: “This is just our way of investing in diverse candidates.”

For Paul Chadha, head of the international development group at Accenture, the multinational consulting company, starting with the hiring pool directly affects whether or not he can hire diverse candidates. “If law students aren’t diverse, law firms can’t hire diverse people. If law firms can’t hire diverse people, corporate counsel can’t hire diverse people,” Chadha said. And if that’s the case, “where am I going to find somebody with three to five years of sophisticated legal experience to handle the matters that we’re looking for, who’s also a minority? It’s not going to happen.”

And the second thing that makes this program stand out is the plan for it to extend beyond just these two days in April. And this is where the continued relationship comes in. The Kirkland program assigned each student with two mentors—one associate and one partner—before they even arrived at the first event.

The hope for the mentoring aspect of the program was to give students the opportunity to get advice and per-

spective from two different vantage points from within the firm, explained Kaeser. “It provides the students with continued networking opportunities as well as guidance and support as they go through the next stages of their careers,” she said. “And from the firm’s perspective, I think that it increases our footprint in the diverse student pipeline.”

Whether or not this goal of continued support is actually achieved largely depends on if mentoring actually extends beyond just this program, as it is supposed to do. For the firm’s part, Kaeser said that the mentoring relationship is not intended to be forced. “We have triggers in place just to remind the associates and partners to reach out,” she said, but she noted that there’s not any requirement on the attorneys to keep up the relationship for, say, a year or five years. “I think that they’ll do it as long as it continues to work,” she added.

Even without mandatory contact requirements, Rose of Cornell Law School said that in the weeks since the program, she’s been in contact with each of her mentors. “I’ve gotten the sense that they’re really invested in the program and will go above and beyond to answer any questions that I may have,” she said.

And for her, it’s been really help-

ful to have both an associate and a partner as mentors. “It’s really nice to have that resource—to connect with somebody who recently went through the process, and who also has a perspective from the other side,” she said of her associate mentor. On the other hand, a partner has “more distance from the actual recruitment process, but has some insight to share about the law firm, things you might be looking for, and things you want to do when you arrive at the law firm,” Rose said.

No one suggested the 1L Diversity Program is a cure-all to the diversity woes in the legal profession, but it is movement in the right direction, said Chadha. “I think that there are a lot of other steps that have to be taken in conjunction with this [program],” he said, “but it’s an important first step.”

As for what the next steps might be, Chadha said that the follow-through is critical. “The other steps that are important for Kirkland and other large firms is further development of the law students as they are going through their legal careers,” he said. It’s important to build the relationships and to see where these students land down the road, he added: “I think that the worst thing you can do is bring everybody together and then not create the follow-through steps.”