
CHICAGO LAWYER®

A PUBLICATION OF THE LAW BULLETIN

VOLUME 30
NUMBER 7

Diversity matters as minority students aim for the big firms

by Maria Kantzavelos

Well before Hector Bove set out on a round of in-office interviews at more than a dozen law firms in Chicago, the student at Northwestern University School of Law had done his homework.

Bove, who was seeking a summer associate position, had studied the law firms' demographics posted by NALP, the Association for Legal Career Professionals, to get a handle on the number of minorities represented among the associate and partnership ranks.

He had made a mental note of the firms that frequently showed up at the receptions and cocktail hours, job fairs, and other events aimed at recruiting minority students. And he took note of the firms that provided funding for events hosted by his school's Latino Law Students Association.

"I'd try to remember back and see if these law firms were visible at these recruiting events. I looked at who were the sponsors at receptions and events. Those law firms stood out for me," Bove said. "I looked at who's putting in the commitment, both time-wise and financially."

Once he arrived at each firm for an interview, he'd take a good look at his surroundings.

"You walk the hallways of any large law firm and you are not going to see a lot of people of color or minorities. When you walk around in interviews, you get taken on tours of the offices and you don't see a lot of that," Bove said. "It's important that these law firms are making efforts to try to change that."

At first glance, he followed his



Dana Brown

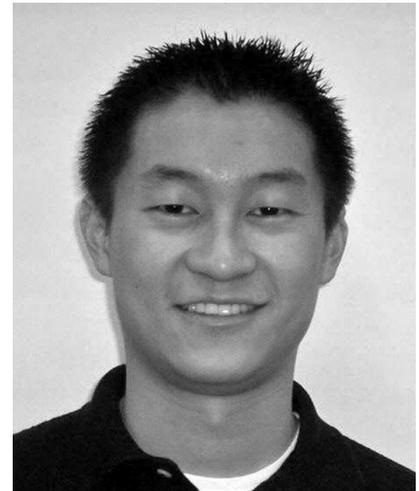
own rule of thumb.

"One of the things I always looked for was, who was interviewing me? And, did the firm have minorities, women, gay and lesbian people — people other than middle-class white men? That sort of had a relevancy into a first impression," Bove said.

"Occasionally, you may feel they put the Hispanic attorney with me because I'm Hispanic, but I don't see a problem with that," Bove said.

"I think it's important to show people interviewing at the firm that there are minorities within the law firm and that they're making an effort. If there is only one [minority] person they put you in front of, that's going to become apparent. That's when you ask the questions, 'What is diversity like at the law firm? What efforts are you doing to encourage diversity?'"

For Bove, a rising 3L who was born in Mexico and raised in Texas, those initial observations and inquiries into diversity initiatives



Kevin Xu

during his visits to some of the city's largest law firms were part of the process of choosing the best law firm fit for him — the place where he could see himself launching a career, with aspirations of becoming a partner.

"Coming from that type of background, I want to be able to see that there are other people like me," Bove said. "When people of the same background have sort of a shared cultural experience, it makes it easier to relate to the person, to a partner who you're going to learn from and work with, who's giving you assignments and advice on the best way to approach life as a lawyer."

Bove, 29, is not alone. As law students of color embark on a profession that still lags behind others in its minority representation, many of them are on the lookout for signs that firms are taking steps to address the situation.

Chicago Lawyer recently talked with law students from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic

backgrounds whose sights are on the big firms, to get their take on what matters when it comes to diversity.

Bove, who spent last summer as an intern at Winston & Strawn, received 13 offers for a summer associate position this year from the 14 firms that had invited him to their offices for an interview. He chose Kirkland & Ellis, which also awarded him a stipend through its diversity fellowship program.

The program, Bove said, is an example of how firms can reach out to minorities in a tangible way.

"I was just looking for a place where I could start my career, learn, and grow as a lawyer," he said. "The diversity of a law firm is very important to me. I do like to see firms that are making tangible steps to increase their diversity. It's a problem facing the legal industry; it typically has not been diverse."

Diversity survey

Chicago Lawyer's 2007 Diversity Survey shows gains in the representation of minority associates and partners at the large firms in Illinois, but the numbers have been slow to rise.

The 14th annual survey was mailed to the 160 largest Illinois law firms, according to Sullivan's Law Directory. Some 77 firms responded with statistics about the gender, age, and race of their Illinois lawyers as of Jan. 31, 2007. (Please see related charts beginning on page 12.)

Minorities now make up 16.3 percent of associates at the largest law firms in Illinois, according to the survey, up from 15.5 percent in 2006 and 15.2 percent in 2005. Meanwhile, 5.1 percent of firm partners are minorities, up from 4.7 percent in 2006 and 4.5 percent in 2005.

African-Americans account for 5 percent of associates, a rise from 4.7 percent the previous year and from 4.8 percent in 2005. But the survey showed little change in the representation of African-American partners, who make up roughly 1.8 percent of law firm partners, compared to 1.7 percent in the last two years.

The number of Hispanic



Calida Motley

associates and partners increased slightly in the 2007 survey, up from 2.9 percent to 3.1 percent, and from 1 percent to 1.2 percent, respectively.

Asian-Americans account for 7.9 percent of law firm associates, according to the survey, an increase from 7.4 percent in 2006. The representation of Asian-American partners also increased over last year, from 1.6 percent to 1.8 percent.

Cutting to the chase

"We're collegial."

"Our doors are always open."

"We get along well."

That's how Dana Brown, a recent graduate of the University of Chicago Law School, recalled some of the common pitches she has heard from law firms seeking talent.

Brown, an African-American who grew up in Highland Park, said she interviewed with 12 Chicago firms before finding her fit at DLA Piper, where she plans to join the insurance group as a new associate.

"The vast majority of firms, I think, do a good job of seeking diverse candidates and managing them effectively," Brown said.

Still, she had some concerns during her job search.

"Diverse law school candidates are aware that clients are now mandating that they see color across the table in their legal representation," Brown said. "Sometimes you can get a sense that some firms are looking to get the status quo. They know they need X number of diverse



Neal Patel

candidates."

When it came to narrowing her choices of firms that had made her offers, Brown said she was looking for the best fit all-around. Figuring out the source of a firm's commitment to diversity was part of it.

"A smart, diverse candidate has to take a step back and say, 'I'm looking at all these offers. Who's just trying to get me in front of their top client, and who wants Dana to be a good lawyer?'"

That is why, Brown said, it was important for her to seek out minority partners or senior associates — people who knew the ropes of a firm — to learn more about their career paths. She wanted to find out whether they were getting challenging work and what their experiences were like at varying stages of their careers.

"If there were African-American partners, especially African-American women partners, I loved to meet with them," Brown said. "If you see them way down the line, they're doing well, they're happy, they're thriving, it makes me — a first-year associate — feel it's possible.

"Sometimes I'd try things out unofficially. I'd call or e-mail and see what things are like away from the microscope of an interview."

At DLA Piper, where she had worked as a summer associate last year, Brown said she found that women were not "just behind the scenes reading documents."

"It's more about what you can do, versus who you are," Brown said.

While she sought out partners and associates of color to gauge the “minority atmosphere” at a firm, Brown said it was equally important for her to network with majority lawyers.

“I’ve heard stories where minority summer associates get mistaken for secretaries,” Brown said. “It’s important to understand how the majority members of the firm respond to you as well.”

Brown, 28, said it’s her goal to make it to the partnership level.

“I have to feel it’s attainable, which is why I chose carefully,” Brown said.

To further test the waters at some firms in question, she asked to speak with fifth- and sixth-year minority associates who were on the verge of becoming partner.

“They’ve been in the trenches. They tend to be a very untapped resource,” Brown said. “Judge a firm not by the diverse candidates who are relatively new to a firm, but judge a firm by the minority talent they’re able to retain and promote.

“If they have a hard time showing you people of color who’ve been there for a while, chances are people have been there but they didn’t stay. Why? Those are the questions you should be asking.”

For Brown, the mentor relationships she has fostered through networking at firm events, and as a student attending events sponsored by minority associations in the Chicago legal community have been an “invaluable asset,” Brown said.

“Most firms in the summer program set you up with mentors. But you can always take it further, if you choose,” Brown said.

Today, she lists Peter Bynoe, the only African-American equity partner in the Chicago office of DLA Piper, among her “unofficial” mentors. The relationship came about during her final round of interviews for her summer associate job at the firm.

“He asked me, ‘What can we do to bring you to Piper?’ I mentioned it was important to me to have resources available. Basically, I was wondering if he would be available to me if I came to the firm. He was like, ‘Give me something challenging;

that’s easy to do,’” Brown recalled. “He proved to be an invaluable resource to me throughout the summer. Every time I requested to meet with him, he made it happen.

“An equity partner of color is quite powerful. I just wanted to know it wasn’t a game, it wasn’t a joke, it wasn’t a selling tool, I wasn’t being pitched.”

You’re not alone

Kevin Xu was nearing the end of his freshman year in the college of engineering at the University of Michigan when he had a revelation that ultimately led him to law.

“I realized the only reason I went into engineering was to fulfill society’s expectations. It wasn’t really something I had a passion for. I was good at math and everyone said, ‘Oh, you’re going to be an engineer, because you’re good at math and you’re Asian,’” said Xu, who moved to the U.S. from Shanghai, China when he was six.

“I realized this wasn’t my career. It wasn’t something that interested me.”

Today, Xu, 21, whose parents are both engineers, is a summer associate at Reed Smith Sachnoff & Weaver. Armed with a degree in industrial engineering, he is entering his second year at the University of Michigan Law School.

“I’m someone who likes more people-interaction in my daily life. That’s something engineering doesn’t always provide,” Xu said. “I just kind of wanted to break the stereotype myself. I wanted to show people that not all Asians have to be engineers. We can have interests in other fields.”

Like the others, he looks for evidence of a firm’s commitment to diversity.

“It’s definitely one of the factors I look at when deciding to work at a law firm. If a law firm does not have any minority lawyers it means they’re not being realistic about how the world works,” Xu said. “If I had two equal firms with equal compensation and all the things being equal, I’d pick the one with the better diversity effort.”

Xu was among some 80 new

summer associates from an array of city firms who gathered recently at the Chicago office of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom for an event organized by the Chicago Committee on Minorities in Large Law Firms. There, diverse partners offered tips to help guide aspiring lawyers through the summer at their respective firms.

The panel covered a lot of ground, from the importance of submitting quality work, to protecting their reputations within a firm, and becoming their own entrepreneurs.

Xu, who is one of five summer associates in the Chicago office of Reed Smith, said the event — which was aimed at minority summer associates — was helpful.

“In a class of five, I wasn’t sure how many other minority summer associates there were in Chicago,” Xu said. “Just to know that I’m in a room full of people dealing with the same situation, it’s good to know you’re not alone.”

As for the rounds of interviews he had at the half-dozen firms he checked out for a summer associate job, an interview with an Asian-American partner at Reed Smith resonated with him.

“The attorney I interviewed with voluntarily gave me information — e-mail addresses and phone numbers of other minority attorneys [in Chicago]. She also mentioned that if I was ever interested in attending events of the Asian American Lawyers Association to feel free to ask her,” Xu said. “None of the other firms did that. I was impressed by that.”

Numbers game

Calida Motley, a summer associate at Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw who is entering her second year at Harvard Law School, said it didn’t take much to gain the attention of law firms when she started the application process last winter for a summer job.

A 2006 graduate of Princeton University who grew up in Chicago’s south suburbs and attended middle school and high school in Peoria, Motley, who is black, submitted her resume to Harvard’s Black Law

Students Association.

From there, she was contacted by firms. As a 1L, Motley attended several receptions on campus, where diversity recruiting coordinators from many firms made it a point to approach her.

“I didn’t do much. The Harvard name is very magical in the legal community,” Motley said.

For Motley, 23, law firm diversity is a factor in deciding where she’ll hang her hat as a new lawyer.

“When it’s time for me to decide, it’s location, then practice area, pro bono opportunities, then I’ll look at the composition of the firm — even before the pay,” Motley said. “I just find that the firms tend to be pretty similar, depending on location and size, with what they pay.”

She, too, keeps tabs on the numbers.

“No one has a lot [of minorities], but some have close to none,” Motley said. “If there’s a firm that’s overwhelmingly white I think, ‘What’s wrong with them?’ I go to school with a ton of minorities and women. I’m thinking, ‘I’m going to school with these people. I know they’re brilliant. Why aren’t you recruiting them?’ Or, ‘Why aren’t you keeping them?’”

“I’m looking to go to a place that sees the value in having incredibly smart crops of lawyers who look and sound like the variety of smart people that exist in this country. When I don’t see that reflected in the numbers, it makes me pause and say, ‘What’s going on? Is it the culture? The old boys’ network? If I get a chance to interview, I dig,” Motley said.

She also seeks input from outside the circles of law firms.

“I definitely make a point to talk to people and find out where firms’ reputations are. I make it a part of my search,” Motley said. “The world is pretty small, especially when it comes to black lawyers. It’s a decent chain of gossip. It can be a pretty close connection.”

She has heard stories of some of the challenges that could come with law firm life as a minority.

“Some people have told me that at some firms, when it comes down to making partner, a lot of people

benefit from those mentee relationships formed earlier. One person told me that it’s so much easier for a partner to mentor a young associate who reminds them of their children, or their niece or nephew. Just from the sheer nature of our race, you can’t emulate that,” Motley said. “It’s so important to find a mentor. Informally, you’ve got to find someone who’s going to fight for you when it comes down to becoming partner. They say that is easier to do when you’re white and you’re male. Some people also say they don’t get very good work assignments compared to their peers,” Motley said.

For Motley, the stories are not shocking. And while she is not entering the field expecting to face the same struggles, she is prepared for that possibility.

“If I’m going to run into it anyway, why run into it when I’m the only [black] person there? Why would I choose to go to a firm where there’s no one else there who has overcome that?”

It’s one thing for a firm to profess its commitment to diversity on its web site and in brochures, Motley said. She searches for more substantial clues.

“The law firms have the same statements on their web sites that I, honestly, don’t read. Pretty much it’s, I’ve read one, I’ve read them all,” Motley said. “Granted, if there was a firm that didn’t have a diversity statement on its web site it would raise a red flag. But I like to see it in practice.”

Home-grown partners

Retention of minorities in law firms is an issue that Brittany Hamelers, who is African-American, often discusses with her friends.

Hamelers, a summer associate at McGuireWoods who is entering her third year at the University of Chicago Law School, said she digs even further than the statistics provided by firms.

She tries to find out not just whether firms have African-American or minority partners, but where those partners came from.

“It’s important to have home-

grown partners that start with you and get the experience they need at your firm and are able to make partner at that same firm,” said Hamelers, 24. “If you have to leave and go somewhere else to get those experiences, that could be problematic.

“A lot of firms, if they have good statistics, they’ll give you the best statistics they have. If they have five minority associates who made partner last year, that’ll be on their brochures,” Hamelers said. “It’s usually the things they aren’t talking about that are problematic. It’s important to do your own research. That one statistic is not the whole story.

“I think that one of the hardest things about being a law student is knowing the right questions to ask,” Hamelers said. “You have to ask the tough questions. Sometimes it can be uncomfortable because they’re interviewing you. You don’t want them to come away with a negative reaction to you.”

Timing is key, she said.

“It’s like when you have a job interview and you want to know how much they’re going to be paying you, you don’t ask that right out of the gate,” Hamelers said. “I don’t necessarily press people immediately about their numbers. Usually, at a call-back, that’s when I’ll start to ask those questions: ‘I saw you had four minority associates that left last year — could you tell me about that?’”

Bove, the summer associate at Kirkland & Ellis, said it became his practice to address the issue of diversity with his third or fourth question in an interview.

“Initially, I would ask, ‘Is there a diversity committee? What is the diversity committee responsible for? What efforts are you doing at recruiting and retaining minority attorneys in the law firm?’” Bove said. “Sometimes, you’d ask that question and there wouldn’t be a specific answer. Other times, there were very specific efforts they were doing at both of those.

“What I hear is that a lot of firms make a very concentrated effort at the recruiting process, and then once the attorney gets in the door, that sort

of falls by the wayside,” Bove said. “It’s important to have business development training aimed at minority attorneys within the law firm. Once you get in the door, have events, networking opportunities, business development training programs for them. All the large law firms should have a diversity committee with two focuses — one on the recruiting end and one on retention.”

A new world

Before setting out for law school, Neal Patel spent a year as a paralegal at New York’s Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, where he got his first taste of law firm life.

“It was a very intense firm. People worked really long hours, but I liked the excitement of being in a law firm, where a lot of stuff was happening all the time. I found the law firm environment was exciting,” said Patel, now a 3L at Northwestern.

Patel, whose parents immigrated from India in the 1970s, pointed out that none of his family members work in law. His father is an engineer and his mother works in business management.

Patel said his year at the New York firm before law school gave him an advantage in his search for the right place for him as he launches his own career in law.

“A lot of minority students don’t have relatives in the law or other people who they can ask for advice,” Patel said. “That’s where those diversity initiatives come in handy.

“Being a minority in the law, it’s like a new world for a lot of people. They don’t have fathers or uncles who are lawyers,” Patel said. “Diversity initiatives are an institutionalized way of making sure minorities don’t fall through the cracks. It’s an institutionalized way

of getting someone to look out for you. That’s kind of nice.”

For Patel, a summer associate at Sonnenschein, Nath & Rosenthal, the job search was about finding a place where he would feel comfortable, “an environment where anyone, despite their background, can come into a legal environment and feel like they can express their opinions. A very relaxed, friendly atmosphere where you can be yourself.

“I like diversity in ideas and thoughts, and openness,” Patel said. “You need the different perspectives you get from different races and cultures, but just having the numbers doesn’t mean you necessarily have the environment. It’s more of an attitude that’s got to come from the senior people on down.

“The key is, if you’re a minority who feels a little lost, it can be a scary, lonely process if you’re not in a place where you feel comfortable.”

Pipeline programming

Alfred Murray, a summer associate at Swanson Martin & Bell who is entering his third year at The John Marshall Law School, said he is a walking example of how initiatives to recruit minorities have been working.

“I would have no access whatsoever to really apply for a job with Swanson Martin & Bell and get the consideration I did had the type of pipeline programming not been available, nor the commitment from Swanson Martin & Bell,” said Murray, who connected with the firm through a minority job fair organized by the Cook County Bar Association. “I would’ve been another law student applying.”

Murray, who is African-American, had worked as a social development director for the James Jordan Boys and Girls Club for more than three years after graduating with a degree

in political science from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

“While my work before law school has definitely been beneficial, I wasn’t a paralegal or an office clerk at a law firm ... I don’t think I was in tune with the whole network,” Murray said. “Having access to submit my resume to that job fair and have all these different firms take a look at my resume, that type of thing at least opened the door to provide an opportunity.

“It’s something that is organized to provide students who, like me, are kind of outside the loop and don’t have an in or a connection,” Murray said. “I don’t have a relative or a family friend that is in a position to refer me to a specific job. The job fair opened up that door not only for myself, but for a lot of people.”

A firm’s presence, coupled with its actions, at job fairs and other events aimed at recruiting minorities is telling, Murray said.

“I do think, ultimately it comes down to what the firm’s commitment is, and what the firm truly is dedicated to,” Murray said. “Most firms recognize the value and recognize the need for diversity. You can kind of get the sense from talking with the key players of a firm whether they’re legitimately committed to that. If they say they’re committed to diversity, but they’re not hiring outside the traditional, white-male pipeline from major law schools, that calls [that commitment] into question.”

Murray, 27, said he wants to see more firms take the initiative even further, with programs aimed at exposing minorities to the profession well before law school.

“It’s all about opening up access to opportunities that students would not otherwise have,” Murray said.★

mkantzavelos@lbpc.com