

# DIVERSITY COMMITTEE: ON A MISSION

BY LISA MCGRANE, PROGRAM DIRECTOR



The Diversity Committee visits the State Bar of Nevada's southern headquarters in Las Vegas: (Left to Right) state bar program director, Lisa McGrane; Augusta Massey; Janet Belcove-Shalin; Veronica Arechederra Hall; Sherri (Sugar) Vogel; Leslie Nino; Krystal Gallagher; Doreen Spears Hartwell; state bar executive director, Kim Farmer; Gabrielle Jones; Robert Marshall; Julie Ostrovsky; Kristina Holman; Mariteresa Rivera-Rogers; state bar president Connie Akridge; Rachel Anderson; Kari Stephens; Paola Armeni; and Romeo Perez.

After a two-year hiatus, the State Bar of Nevada's Diversity Committee was reestablished in 2010 to bring the issue of diversity within the profession back into the limelight. "It's an important topic," committee chair Romeo R. Perez says. "When you look around and notice the number of minorities in the profession, especially in comparison with the backgrounds of the clients we serve, it's hard to argue diversity isn't important."

A membership survey conducted in 2009 confirms this. Of those who responded, 77 percent of the bar's members identified themselves as Caucasian, with self-identified Asian/Pacific Islanders (3.4 percent), Hispanic/Latino (2.7 percent) and Black/African Americans (1.4 percent) representing the next three largest segments of our attorney population. In comparison, a 2011 U.S. Census Bureau report reflects that 66 percent of Nevada's population is white, with the next-highest minority percentage listed as Hispanic (26.5 percent).

With that data in hand, the committee set out on a mission — literally. "Our first step was to create a mission statement," Perez says. But before beginning, the committee needed to decide where it was going.

The committee established a two-fold focus: to promote diversity within the bar and the profession, and to increase cultural competence within the profession.

The first part was fairly straightforward. The committee recognized the need to encourage young men and women of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds to consider law as a profession. For many kids raised without the socioeconomic advantages of their counterparts, interaction with the legal system is often negative in nature.

The State Bar of Nevada offers several law-related education programs that bring a positive introduction to the law to students grades K-12; they include Mock Trial and *We the People* competitions and an annual Law Day Live event. The bar's Young Lawyers Section also introduces fourth graders to the legal system through the Goldilocks: Trial of the Century program.

The Diversity Committee sought to build on those successful programs and in 2011, introduced the first

annual Diversity Scholarship. Funded through a one-time grant by the bar's Lawyer Referral Program, the committee offers two \$5,000 scholarships each year to students enrolled at University of Nevada Las Vegas' William S. Boyd School of Law (Boyd).

Last year's scholarships were awarded to Patrick Benito and Colin Seale who both demonstrated a commitment to the committee's mission and strong ties to the community. The committee expects to announce this year's scholarship recipients sometime this month.

Diversity Committee member Adam Bult and fellow Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck attorney Jennifer Carleton also serve as liaisons to the Professional Development Fellowship Program, a joint venture between the bar and Boyd to pair minority law school students with firms committed to increasing diversity in their hiring and retention practices.

This marks Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck's fourth year of involvement in this program. Bult and Carleton say their firm is committed to the program because it exposes law students with a less traditional background to firm life. Regardless of the origin of the candidates, they explain, the firm expects great results from the fellows and they have had great success with them. They are most excited to see a growing number of firms making a commitment to these fellows and the increasing diversity of the Nevada bar.

Accomplishing the committee's second goal of increasing cultural competency within the profession is something that Perez concedes may take more time. "It's sometimes hard for us to consider the cultural reasons behind our clients' actions," he says. Cultural competence is about adapting to and respecting different cultural beliefs.

Committee member and Federal Public Defender Rene Valladares is an expert on the subject. Valladares is a national speaker on the issue of cultural defense and presented the subject at last year's State Bar of Nevada Annual Meeting and at a continuing legal education seminar offered in conjunction with Boyd.

"Basic cultural competency is essential for an attorney practicing in Nevada," he explains. "The population of our state is becoming increasingly diverse and this trend shows no sign of abating. To properly serve our multicultural population a Nevada lawyer must be keenly sensitive to how culture can impact an individual's outlook and actions."

Valladares is scheduled to present again at the 2012 Annual Meeting in San Diego.

Moving forward, the committee has again narrowed its focus on combining its resources with local and specialty bar associations who have similar goals. In January 2012 the committee hosted the third annual State Bar of Nevada Diversity Luncheon in commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. The luncheon has grown every year with 16 representatives in attendance this year from the Las Vegas chapters of the



**From left to right, immediate past state bar president Cam Ferenbach, Diversity Scholarship winners Rick Benito and Colin Seale, and Diversity Committee chair, Romeo Perez.**

Latino Bar Association and National Bar Association; Southern Nevada Association of Women Attorneys; Nevada Attorneys for Criminal Justice; Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada; and the Senior Law Project. Together, these groups shared information about their diversity initiatives and discussed ways to support each other in the future.

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The committee also developed a webpage on the bar's site, [www.nvbar.org/diversity](http://www.nvbar.org/diversity), which includes links to the various bar associations and lists of upcoming events within the bar and the community. "We'd like to act as an information bridge to the state bar," says Perez.

Members of the committee and the bar have also begun to branch out and speak about joint diversity initiatives at specialty bar luncheons and other events, including the National Bar Association, Las Vegas Chapter Annual Gala event held in November.

This interconnectivity is important to the committee – and arguably – to the profession as a whole. ■

## DIVERSITY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Romeo R. Perez, Chair  
Janet Belcove-Shalin  
Kathleen Ja Sook  
Bergquist  
Adam Bult  
Justice Michael Cherry  
Augusta Massey  
Rene Valladares



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