

## Legal diversity program gives lawyers a ‘voice at the table’ - part 3

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*Last November, Lumen launched a new program designed to encourage its law firms to give greater opportunities to diverse attorneys. In the last of his three-part series, Vice President and Deputy General*



*Counsel Ryan McManis shows how this program evolved from an idea to a reality.*

With the idea formed, I thought about the successful attorneys whom I knew, whom I liked, and who were my go-to hires following years of experience with them before and after the merger. Then I called those people and talked about my vision for a program that I thought could make a difference. I listened and tweaked and listened some more. I brainstormed with my team. In the end, we developed what is now our pilot partnership with six firms that we regularly use and really trust, but more importantly, with six lawyers we knew would champion these efforts and drive our success.

Their individual backgrounds and stories are amazing. Jerry is a special prosecutor in the George Floyd murder trial. Grant Woods at Gallagher Kennedy in Phoenix is a two-time Attorney General and led civil rights initiatives for attorneys general across the country during his tenure. Katie Reilly from Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell in Denver and Emily Harris from Corr Cronin in Seattle are proven diversity champions and reached the very top level of management in their firms, not to mention being among the best lawyers with whom I've ever worked. Bill Codinha from Nixon Peabody has had a legendary career doing everything from being a prosecutor, to running

congressional investigations on POWs and Whitewater, to working miracles on behalf of Lumen. Phillip Sykes from Butler Snow in Jackson, Mississippi is not only a terrific lawyer, arbitrator and person, but also one of the first to encourage me to push this program forward and is a true diversity champion in his firm and community. The value and commitment each of these attorneys from different corners of the country bring to our program is phenomenal.

Once these six partners teamed up with us in the pilot program, the real work began. Each partner was asked to select a promising, diverse, mid-level lawyer from his or her firm. Lumen committed to provide opportunities to those lawyers (including leading a Lumen legal matter, giving them full access to how and why decisions are being made inside the company – not always a view to which outside counsel is privy – and establishing relationships throughout Lumen). Each of the participants have access to all six of the partners leading the program as mentors, as well as to me my team and others throughout Lumen. The hope is that these relationships will last well into the future, and the intent is to accelerate each participant's path to leadership within their own firm.

These relationships, the personal network that the participants will build and the skills that we hope to instill in them over the next year are all steppingstones we believe will accelerate their careers. Of course, they are going to need to put in the work, and it isn't a guarantee that they'll become partners at their firms, but they are acquiring skills that should be valuable in whatever they ultimately choose to do. While many initiatives give diverse lawyers "a seat at the table," we want to give them "a voice at the table."

The program is designed to foster inclusion, and in turn, for the participants to build strong, durable relationships with their clients, as well as the internal grit to speak their mind, even when they're delivering a challenging message. And finally, the program seeks to provide a space for them to use the geographic, demographic and subject-matter diversity among the participating firms and lawyers to expand their networks inside and outside the Lumen program.

In many ways, relationships are an accelerator of success, and forging these relationships among this group is an important benefit both for my team and the participants. Taken as a whole, we believe these strong client relationships are what will ultimately drive the increased awareness within each firm of the real value that each lawyer brings. In time, there is a real expectation that our program will drive increased equity not just amongst the diverse lawyers within their firms, but within the larger legal communities in which they practice.

Following months of planning and discussion within the company, we launched the program in November of last year, with incredible support from Lumen leaders in legal, HR and throughout the business. In the short time since launch, about a dozen firms have reached out expressing

interest in joining the program next year. Nixon Peabody, the program's partner firm in Boston, commented that they "find the Lumen program to be unique in that it actually assigns diverse lawyers to lead roles in cases, teaches them about Lumen, and [creates]...a relationship between the diverse lawyer participants and the Lumen in-house counsel and decision-makers. All of this with the long-term commitment of having the diverse lawyers build their own independent contacts...." Katie Reilly from Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell (WTO), our Denver partner firm, added "through this initiative, Lumen is putting words into action. In addition to requiring diverse teams, Lumen is stepping up and itself investing to develop diverse and women lawyers in partnership with law firms. It's a fresh approach to increase retention and advancement in our industry and also to deepen relationships with trusted counsel. WTO is thrilled to be participating." This type of support is what makes me believe the program has a real chance to drive meaningful change beyond Lumen's legal department and is bringing a tremendous energy to my team, the participants and the program.

Diversity is a true differentiator for us. It makes everyone better. Many of the litigation issues we're trying to solve require creative, outside-the-box approaches that you're simply not going to get from a bunch of buttoned up guys who look the same, sound the same and have the same general background and experiences. You need the spirited debate that truly thrives in the diverse team environments that we are trying so hard to create.

It's really exciting for me that Lumen's program has been so well received. As I reflect on where we are, I'm encouraged by what the future holds. I feel good about the likelihood that our program will make a meaningful difference, but for me, the real value is that the journey in getting here has made me a better person, a better lawyer and more aware of the tremendous power that each of us has if we just stop talking and start doing. And, for those of you that know me, you also know it is nearly impossible to get me to stop talking. In this case, I'm glad that I did.

<https://news.lumen.com/Legal-Diversity-Program-Lawyers-A-Voice-3>