

# Diversity Program Enters its 17th Year

by Marian Cover Dockery

**S**eventeen years ago, two mavericks in the legal profession, Judge Marvin Arrington, Fulton County Superior Court, and Charles Lester Jr., retired partner of Sutherland, made their commitment to diversity a reality by forming the Georgia Diversity Program (GDP). This program successfully communicates the critical need for diversity in a legal system through steering committee meetings, its educational seminars and symposiums, pipeline programs and other resources. The program's strategies for total inclusion of diverse attorneys is reflected in the composition of committee members, the topics covered in seminars and the ongoing commitment to expand its focus and embrace and recognize the needs of other excluded groups from the profession.

Diversity has evolved to include many things. We can talk about geographical diversity, generational diversity and the diversity of thought. The reality is that in our quest to become a diverse profession, we are embracing first and foremost women, minorities and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. The State Bar of Georgia Diversity Program designs a strategy to successfully



improve representation of all groups in the Bar by first addressing the issue through its CLE programs. Showcasing leaders in our profession of all backgrounds is necessary to impress upon those nonbelievers that diversity is not just the right thing to do, but it is also good business. The program educates its participants by bringing law school deans, professors, judges, general counsels and law partners together to explain to our members why the best teams are the diverse teams of educators, judicial panels, in-house counsel and law firm partners. With teams that include those of different races, nationalities, religions, gender and sexual orientations, we discover a diversity of ideas. With a diversity of ideas, we are more prepared to face the challenges of the global playing field.

Hearing some of the leaders of the State Bar discuss their own personal journeys during our recent "Diversity Program Conversations" confirms that we are more alike than we are different.

On Sept. 18, Justice Robert Benham, a GDP honorary chair, and Charles T. Lester Jr., program founder, discussed their journeys with Valerie Jackson of National



(Left to right) Avarita L. Hanson, executive director of the Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism, interviews Chief Justice Leah Ward Sears during "A Conversation With Leah Ward Sears" in Spring 2008.

Public Radio at the annual CLE and luncheon. They shared their stories of how a segregated Georgia impacted their upbringing and how their commitment to diversity grew from life experiences. Justice Benham mesmerized his audience with stories of how he spent three years in law school, isolated and ignored by his fellow students. He recounted how years later one fellow law student invited him to speak at a Rotary program. During that program, the attorney introduced Justice Benham and surprised him by apologizing for his past behavior before the audience, blaming his racist conduct on his upbringing.

Charlie Lester engaged his listeners with his story of growing up in a white Atlanta with a mother who was very enlightened. It was not unusual that through his mother's volunteer efforts, diverse groups of women met in his home and since his contact with people of color was limited, this exposure was an additional educational experience for him. Lester blamed himself for not getting to know more African-Americans, and it was in law school where he met Arrington with whom he later co-founded the GDP.

Chief Justice Leah Sears recalled her journey in another conversation held in the spring of 2008. An

African-American woman of many accomplishments, Justice Sears amazed some of the younger attorneys because she was so "down to earth" and faced the same challenges that we all do. Some of her comments evoked laughter from the attendees when she conveyed that a typical day may include making toast and tea for her husband before leaving for work; her mother telephoning her about the big sale on white blouses at Macy's right before she goes on the bench; and her son who graduated with an honors degree in physics from the University of Virginia explaining to her his new work, which she hardly understood.

Those conversations with the State Bar members can only be described as a recent oral history that is both enlightening and educational. The program plans to continue to present "Conversations" in 2009.

Seminars led by attorneys, bar leaders and consultants of all backgrounds ignite the ongoing discussion relative to the paucity of women and minority general counsels, equity partners and partners at law firms and keep the fire burning under an issue that is hardly resolved.

The annual business development CLE program has been a work in progress. This year's pres-

entation includes a three-part seminar sponsored by UPS, Alston & Bird and the Coca-Cola Company. Part one, presented on Jan. 28 at the State Bar, featured law partners who are leading rainmakers for their firms. Their experience, knowledge and business development strategies were the focus of the discussion. Because diversity has changed the way corporations evaluate firms during the hiring process, the panelists addressed this issue as well. The panel was led by Sam Woodhouse, Woodhouse Law Firm, and included: Richard Sinkfield, Rogers & Hardin; Francisco Gonzalez, Adorno & Yoss (Miami); Lawrie Demorest, Alston & Bird; Roy Hadley, Powell Goldstein; and June Towery, Nelson, Mullins, Riley & Scarborough.

Part two of the program, scheduled for March 26, will feature the general counsels of Equifax, UPS, the Coca-Cola Company, the City of Atlanta and the Fulton County Law Department. Individuals from these companies will give advice to attendees on how to prepare for the business development meeting and what their expectations are in meeting prospective outside counsel. General counsels from the foregoing companies will select attorneys with whom they wish to meet in a separate meeting scheduled for the spring from previously submitted online applications. Attorneys in private practice who wish to register should visit [www.gabar.org/programs/georgia\\_diversity\\_program/](http://www.gabar.org/programs/georgia_diversity_program/). 



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State Bar of Georgia Diversity Program. For more information on the Diversity Program, go to [www.gabar.org/programs/georgia\\_diversity\\_program/](http://www.gabar.org/programs/georgia_diversity_program/).