

DAYL Diversity Forum 2006: Another Step Toward Inclusion for the Dallas Legal Community

by Tonya Parker, Patsy Yung, and Amy Davis Benavides

The DAYL Lawyers Promoting Diversity Committee is on a mission.

"We, as a legal community, must go beyond making the business case for diversity and inclusion. By discussing the root fears and discomfort that can cause resistance to efforts at creating a diverse work environment, we can begin to create a workplace in which everyone feels a sense of belonging. Then we can focus on our love of the law and the ideals that brought us to the legal profession," says DAYL Lawyers Promoting Diversity Co-Chair **Amy D. Benavides**.

On November 9, 2006, the committee hosted a Diversity Forum, at which the more than 100 attendees engaged in just such a discussion, addressing, in particular, the definition and semantics of diversity and how the language we use to discuss it can impact our efforts at inclusion. The Forum included a keynote address by State Representative **Rafael**

Anchía over the lunch hour, followed by two hour-long panels, co-sponsored by the **Dallas Bar Association, Dallas Hispanic Bar Association, Dallas Asian-American Bar Association, Dallas Gay and Lesbian Bar Association, Dallas Women Lawyers Association, J.L. Turner Legal Association, and Lambda Legal**. The Forum was made possible by a grant from the **Texas Young Lawyers Association (TYLA)**.

Representative Anchía, an attorney with Patton Boggs, noted that Dallas law firms have tended to plow the same ground when it comes to efforts to increase the diversity among lawyers - with little or no change in results. He challenged Dallas lawyers to be bold in their efforts to

create inclusion, following the example of many DFW-based companies.

The Forum's first-hour panelists included three corporate counsel, who are charged, in part, with inclusion within their respective legal departments: **Michael Daugherty**, Vice President - Legal Department at Chubb & Son, Inc.; **Lisa M. Winston**, Vice President - Labor and Employment Law at TXU Corp.; and

ees together suggested that diversity efforts should be defined more broadly, going beyond race, ethnicity, gender, and religion to include differences in background, culture, experience, interest, and ability.

"Diversity must be synonymous with inclusion. Everyone has a role, and everyone adds value," explained DAYL Lawyers Promoting Diversity Co-Chair

Tonya Parker.

The final panel consisted of **Vicki D. Blanton**, President-Elect of the J.L. Turner Legal Association and Senior Attorney of Corporate Benefits for JCPenney, and founding partners of three Dallas law firms, **Kevin Wiggins**, founder of White & Wiggins, LLP n/k/a Adorno Yoss White & Wiggins, LLP; **Veronica Bates**, founding partner of Hermes Sargent Bates, LLP; and **Donald E. Godwin**, founder of Godwin Pappas Langley Ronquillo, LLP. These panelists provided advice about



(l to r) Amy Davis Benavides, Patsy Yung, Kevin Wiggins, DAYL President Chad Ruback, Tonya Parker, TYLA President Karin Crump, Vicki Blanton, Don Godwin, and Veronica Bates.

Maureen Moore, Vice President - Labor and Employment at Blockbuster, Inc. These panelists, along with non-lawyer **Dr. Susan Gore** of the consulting firm The Mentor Group, Inc., discussed diversity initiatives from the perspective of diversity coaches rather than diversity cops.

The panelists acknowledged a cynicism about diversity initiatives, often stemming from fear that race, gender, and ethnicity could trump skill and effort and, therefore, an individual's ability to control his or her career, income, and opportunities. The panelists counseled education as a means to combat these fears, through discussion that identifies and, in some cases, debunks stereotypes. Panelists and attend-

ees provided practical communication strategies to address differences with clients and colleagues.

"It's always okay to speak up when a client or colleague speaks out in a way that is disrespectful to who you are as a person. The key is to deliver the message with respect, for you and the person to whom you are providing feedback," reflected DAYL Promoting Diversity Co-Chair **Patsy Yung**.

Panelists described the process as a dialogue, communication geared to provide meaning and understanding. They agreed that dialogue demands much of its participants: *A willingness to suspend assumptions. To participate equally, without judgement. To listen for understanding.*