

Allowing Our Differences to Unite Us

ABA helps to break down racial, sexual and disability barriers in the legal profession



EVERY LAWYER, EVERY PERSON contributes to a diverse profession and society by offering unique perspectives and life experiences. That said, the bar's work on diversity focuses on people from groups with persistent, documented challenges to full participation in the legal profession and to rights as citizens.

This is why the ABA devotes considerable resources to our Center for Racial and Ethnic

Diversity, Commission on Women in the Profession, Commission on Mental and Physical Disability Law, and Commission on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. It is why we have representation from, and collaborate with, the Hispanic National Bar Association, National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, National Bar Association, and National Native American Bar Association. We value similar relationships with the National Association of Women Judges, National Association of Women Lawyers, National Conference of Women's Bar Associations, and National Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Bar Association.

BRANCHES OF DIVERSITY

THE CENTER FOR RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY HAS roots in our association's unpleasant past. Before 1943, lawyers of color were barred from ABA membership.

Though we've made progress in diversity, the legal profession is still nearly 90 percent white, while minorities represent only about 20 percent of law school enrollment, and that percentage is dropping.

The work of the ABA Presidential Advisory Council on Diversity in the Profession is therefore very important. The council offers programs and services to improve diversity in the legal profession, starting with grade school and consummating with bar passage. The ABA Legal Opportunity Scholarship Fund provides law school scholarships primarily for students of color.

Once students enter the legal profession, we must encourage their fulfillment and advancement. The ABA Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession helps create leadership and economic opportunities for racially and ethnically diverse lawyers within the ABA and the legal profession. The commission, along with the ABA Council on Racial and Ethnic Justice, also addresses issues of discrimination and bigotry within the profession and throughout society.

An equally important priority for a diverse bar is the

status of women. Despite hard-won achievements, many female lawyers still face barriers such as sexual harassment and inequities in pay and advancement. The problems are exacerbated for women of color who may experience insecurities in a predominantly white, male world. Individual female lawyers can feel discouraged and isolated in their professional development. The ABA Commission on Women in the Profession draws upon the expertise and diverse backgrounds of its member volunteers to develop programs, policies and publications to advance women in public and private practice, the judiciary and academia.

Also part of the diversity equation are people with disabilities. The ABA Commission on Mental and Physical Disability Law promotes justice and the rule of law for the mentally and physically disabled, and encourages their participation in the legal profession. The commission works on disability law issues, as well as the professional needs of lawyers and law students with disabilities.

The most recent addition to the ABA's diversity groups is the Commission on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, which secures for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals full access to the ABA, the legal profession and the justice system.

To advance our awareness of diversity issues and develop strategies to resolve them, the ABA this month will bring together bar leaders at a national Diversity Summit in Washington, D.C. The commission planning the summit is led by co-chairs Eduardo Rodriguez and Judge James Wynn Jr. Our goal is the open and honest exchange of experience and ideas to inform the direction of the ABA and legal profession for years to come.

To learn more about and obtain benefits from the ABA's diversity groups, please visit these websites:

- Center for Racial and Ethnic Diversity, abanet.org/diversity.
- Commission on Women in the Profession, abanet.org/women.
- Commission on Mental and Physical Disability Law, abanet.org/disability.
- Commission on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, abanet.org/sogi.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "H. Thomas Wells Jr.". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized initial "H" and "W".

H. Thomas Wells Jr.