



THE ALABAMA STATE BAR  
DIVERSITY IN THE PROFESSION COMMITTEE:

# Continuing to Build a More Inclusive Bar

By Aldos L. Vance

It was a Saturday in January like any other, yet markedly different. On January 12, 2008, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute was filled with attorneys from across the State. We gathered to hear from distinguished members of the Alabama State Bar (“ASB”), all of whom entered the practice of law in a very different era. The program was organized by Jefferson County Circuit Court Judge Eugene Verin and the Magic City Bar Association (“MCBA”) as part one of their Silver Anniversary Leadership Series. Judge Verin and the MCBA collaborated with the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.

In no particular order, the illustrious panel included United States District Court Judge for the Northern District of Alabama U.W. Clemon, Demetrius C. Newton, Earl Hilliard (former United States Representative for the Seventh District of Alabama), J. Richmond Pearson (former Jefferson County Circuit Court Judge, United States Assistant Attorney, and former State Senator), J. Mason Davis, Ralph D. Cook (former Justice of the Supreme Court of Alabama), and W. L. Williams. All of the panelists were African-American. Among the memories and history shared throughout the day, the distinguished panelists retold breathtaking accounts of their entry into the ASB. To put

it mildly, they overcame the stifling racial animus of that era to become members of our bar and leaders in our profession.

Undoubtedly, there are similar stories to be told by the first women who joined the bar as well as other firsts. As the crowd listened to the courageous stories of these legal trail blazers, I thought about how many of us often take our admission and the benefits of the ASB for granted. Unlike our heroes and heroines of the past, once we pass the bar examination we are all automatically included in the ASB.

In 1923, the Alabama Legislature adopted legislation integrating the ASB with state government.<sup>1</sup> The ASB’s enabling legislation can be found in ALA. CODE § 34-3-1 *et seq.*, (1975). Passing the bar exam allows for automatic and mandatory inclusion in the ASB. Mandatory membership allows the Supreme Court of Alabama to better regulate the legal profession. The dual role of the ASB is as follows: (1) the state bar is the licensing and regulatory agency for lawyers in Alabama, and (2) it is a private association with responsibilities largely of a service nature which benefits the legal profession as well as the general public.<sup>2</sup> Even under this legislation, it was the sacrifice and concerted effort of minority pioneers, in the broadest sense, which produced a diverse bar.

As of February 2008, ASB membership totaled 15,580. Current ASB membership is comprised of the following:<sup>3</sup>

Race	Gender
Caucasian.....93.6%	Male .....71.8%
African-American .....5.9%	Female ....28.2%
Other .....0.5%	

ASB members come from various backgrounds and walks of life. Because of our varied backgrounds, the ASB in or about 1988-1989 formed the Minority Participation and Opportunity Committee (MPOC). This committee was formed by then ASB President Gary Huckaby. Subsequent ASB past presidents also supported and advanced the MPOC. The MPOC’s name was later changed to the Diversity in the Profession Committee.

Under the ASB’s first African-American president, Fred D. Gray, Sr., active participation by minorities in the bar became evident and the Diversity in the Profession Committee was reborn. Mr. Gray served as bar president from July 2002 to July 2003. Mr. Gray recognized that while the membership role of the ASB was diverse, the overall active membership was not.<sup>4</sup> Diversity, as he defined it, included “gender, race, geographic region, age, and the whole gambit.”<sup>5</sup> This definition is all inclusive.

Under Mr. Gray's leadership a Task Force on Diversity was appointed and chaired by former Justice Hugh Maddox of the Supreme Court of Alabama and former Governor Albert Brewer. Past bar president Warren B. Lightfoot and J. Mason Davis co-chaired the task force. In shaping its objectives, the task force adopted this mission statement "[t]o increase racial and gender diversity at all levels of the legal profession in Alabama by promoting full and equal participation in the legal profession by minorities and women."<sup>6</sup> The task force did an outstanding job in establishing both short-term and long-term recommendations. These recommendations are a blueprint for promoting diversity in the ASB.

Subsequent past bar presidents continued to support diversity efforts. Current ASB President Samuel N. Crosby has given great support to the Diversity in the Profession Committee. The committee is

guided by the accomplishments of the Task Force on Diversity. The task force's blueprint directs the committee to: (1) coordinate with other entities within the association and cooperate with national, state and local minority bar associations, judges associations, law schools, law firms and other professional entities to increase educational, professional, and associational opportunities for minorities and women; (2) evaluate the performance of the association and the profession in this regard; (3) devise and report worthwhile programs conducted by other bar associations throughout the country with special emphasis placed upon short term and long term goals to increase the number of minorities and women in the profession; (4) assist the Young Lawyer's Section in its annual Minority Law Conference and programs to promote diversity; (5) act as a clearinghouse to publicize and disseminate written plans

and promote their implementation; (6) continue to study and track trends of issues facing minorities and women lawyers; and (7) encourage greater minority participation in the organized bar. Armed with this blueprint, the committee is assisting the bar in reaching every aspect of the profession.

Members of the Diversity in the Profession committee are appointed for staggered terms. Current members of the committee are from Huntsville, Decatur, Birmingham, Tuscaloosa, Montgomery, McIntosh, and Mobile. Its members also differ by age, gender, race and practice area. This year the committee targeted several of the short-term and long-term recommendations previously identified by the task force. Understanding that diversity issues are ever changing, the committee, in keeping with the goals and objectives of the task force, continues to study and track issues facing minorities and women lawyers.



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In continuing to advance the goals of the ASB, the committee is dedicated to strengthening the bar's diversity. Specifically, the committee has targeted five areas for the 2007-2008 term: (1) partnering with established ASB mentor program with an emphasis on diversity; (2) getting involved in and establishing programs for high school students; (3) contacting four-year colleges about pre-law programs targeting diverse students and assist in advancing diversity in the profession at the collegiate level; (4) continuing to research and compile information on needs assistance subsidy program for incoming law students in order to address these issues; and (5) continuing to research and compile information on keeping diverse attorneys in state in order to address these issues. Addressing these issues will require the continued diligence of future committee members and members of the bar.

As an extension of the bar, the Diversity in the Profession Committee recognizes the contributions of all of its members and the benefits of a diverse bar. Accentuating these benefits will enrich our legal profession. It has been said that diversity is each of us and all of us. The committee and the ASB are devoted to making this a reality. ▲▼▲



*Aldos L. Vance is a partner in the Birmingham office of Starnes & Atchison LLP and was admitted to the Alabama State Bar in 2000. He is a co-chair of the state bar's Diversity in the Profession Committee.*

## Endnotes

1. *Alabama State Bar Backgrounder* (last visited on Feb. 28, 2008) <[www.alabar.org/media/backgrounder.cfm](http://www.alabar.org/media/backgrounder.cfm)>.
2. *Id.*
3. *Membership Statistics and Information* (last visited on Feb. 28, 2008) <[www.alabar.org/members/information.cfm](http://www.alabar.org/members/information.cfm)>.
4. Fred D. Gray, Sr., *The Alabama Lawyer: The President Reflects on a Momentous Year*, Vol. 61, No. 5 at 212 (July 2003).
5. *Id.*
6. Alabama State Bar Task Force on Diversity Minutes (Dec. 12, 2002).

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