

RPPTL LOOKS TO DIVERSIFY

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RPPTL looks to diversify

Seminar aimed at attracting more minority involvement

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The Real Property, Probate, and Trust Law Section is determined to diversify the Bar's largest and oldest section come hell or high water. No one witnessed the apocalypse, but the high water came in the form of tropical depression Barry that threatened to cancel the section's June 2 diversity seminar.

While 50 people signed up to attend the Introduction to Will and Trust Drafting program at the Norma B. Howard Conference Center in Ft. Lauderdale, sponsored by the Membership Diversity Committee of the RPPTL section, tropical depression Barry managed to waylay only 15 of them.

Rohan Kelley, chair of the Real Property, Probate, and Trust Law Section, said he intended to devote energy to increasing the section's minority membership. Kelley, along with his son, Shane, and his daughter, Tae Kelley Bronner, searched for ways to make it easier for minority attorneys to wedge their collective feet into the door that is real property, probate, and trust law.

The Kelleys respect the fact that minority clients will have different needs and issues than nonminority clients and, for that reason, chose to focus on the basics as a starting point. Shane Kelley said they would like to offer interested attorneys the tools they need to get started and, hopefully, succeed. Subsequently, Rohan Kelley said, a seminar was born.

The idea first came to Rohan Kelley when he became chair of the RPPTL section a year ago. He invited the section's young lawyers to send a liaison to the section's executive council meetings, and Kelley was surprised when he noticed the liaison was black. ▲

“I looked out and saw one black face, and it just hit me like a sledgehammer: There aren’t any others.”

Rohan Kelley said the concept of diversity is the right model for any organization, and RPPTL’s is no different. Seeing one black face in a sea of white ones brought that point home, Rohan Kelley said.

Statistically, Shane Kelley knows that “there must be a contingent of minority lawyers practicing in this area of law,” but says the issue is that “they’re not members of the section. That’s why we are trying to increase minority involvement and representation in the section as a whole,” he said.

Shane Kelley said breaking into real property, probate, and trust law work is hard, not only for minority attorneys, but younger lawyers as well. Clients with needs in these areas usually look for more seasoned attorneys, which makes it somewhat difficult for those who are fresh out of law school, he said.

“It’s especially difficult if you’re a younger, minority attorney,” Shane Kelley said. “There are not a lot of minority attorneys practicing in this area, which tends to limit mentoring opportunities.”

Shane Kelley described the seminar as mutually beneficial. The section stands to gain members and important feedback, and the attendees gain the training and the resources they need to break into the business.

“You join the section and grow the membership, and in exchange you get the chance to make contacts and potentially get referrals,” he said.

Shane Kelley said diversity consultants and minority bar associations were involved in the recruitment process. The minority bar leaders sent out a call to arms, contacting their members and encouraging participation in a free seminar that offered five-and-a-half hours of CLE credit.

The seminar was a veritable United Nations of bar associations with attendees from women, African-American, Caribbean, Haitian, South Asian, and Asian Pacific minority bars.

“We think this is the way we’re going to focus our efforts going forward,” said Shane Kelley. “The response was wonderful.”



He advised attendees looking for something more substantive to join the section, which boasts nearly 50 committees whose work has an important impact on policy, court rules, and new legislation relating to the section's areas of practice.

"Committees are the nuts and bolts of the section," said Shane Kelley. "That's where laws are made, rules are revised — basically where everything happens."

Now the section wants to put on a real estate seminar on Florida's West Coast with the same premise: Inviting minority lawyers to learn the basics of real estate law just as they learned the basics of will and trust drafting in South Florida.

The Kelleys are even considering having another seminar on wills and trusts to get the people who wanted to attend the last seminar but were wait-listed.

"The attendee surveys indicated that the seminar was really a great success, and that they could take the information we gave them and actually start to get involved in this area of the law," Shane Kelley said.

Roshawn Banks of the All Law Center in Ft. Lauderdale and the immediate past-president of the T.J. Reddick Bar Association attended, along with her 17-year-old son, Dion. Trusts and wills are not usually on the short list of things that will hold a teenage boy's attention, but Banks noted her son stayed awake during the entire seminar and that they even discussed what they learned during the ride home.

Banks said she attended, not necessarily because she wanted to join the section, but for personal growth.

"It was free of charge for minority bar members and it was being held on a Saturday afternoon, so it was perfect," Banks said.

Even though Banks has no immediate plans to become a RPPTL member, she said she would go directly to the Kelleys for advice if she ever changes her mind.

"I think [Rohan Kelly] would be open to talking to me and offering whatever assistance I needed," Banks said.

