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Legal Diversity Summit Deemed Huge Success by Organizers, Participants

By Julien R. Fielding
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On April 11, more than 175 participants, including employers, government officials and law students from five states, gathered at the Embassy Suites in downtown Omaha to attend Nebraska's first Legal Diversity Summit. The event was organized in response to the Minority and Justice Task Force's finding that in this state, minorities are drastically underrepresented in the legal profession.

"I think it was an excellent summit," said Shirley Mora James, president of the Nebraska Hispanic Bar Association. "This was an opportunity for the legal and business communities to seriously think about our need for diversity in the state, and it was good for employers to look at students of color who they wouldn't normally get to meet."

"I thought we had a really good mix of employers and students," said The Hon. John Gerrard, co-chair of the Minority and Justice Implementation Committee. "Government agencies, large and small law

firms, and a number of companies, such as Mutual of Omaha and Union Pacific, were well represented. The [Nebraska] Supreme Court was extremely pleased."

The highlight of the five-hour event was attendance by two nationally prominent speakers: Dennis Archer, the first African-American president of the American Bar Association, and Muzette Hill, a native of Omaha who has spoken about retention issues on numerous occasions for the American Bar Association.

"The speakers were excellent," James said. "Both shared their experiences and showed how to look at things in a more positive light. Certain situations may be difficult but you can't let them stop you; you need to keep moving on."

"The speakers were outstanding and their message was well received," the Hon. Gerrard said. "Two ideas that came out of their presentations were: One, that the more diverse the workplace the better, and two, that corporate America is ahead of

the legal community when it comes to hiring. Both Archer and Hill said that law firms had better have a broad racial base, because corporations look at [a firm's] ethnic makeup when they are hiring. It's happening in the larger cities, but when they are hiring local counsel, they're also looking at the ethnic makeup of the firms as a factor.

"And it's an important factor. Not only is having a diverse workplace the right thing to do, but if you don't, you will get left behind. It was a wake up call for everyone. A lot of eyes and ears were open. It was an eye-opener for me."

Others who attended the Legal Diversity Summit also found this message to be revelatory. "I was surprised at the degree to which corporate clients place an emphasis on diversity in the firms they hire," said Patrick Borchers, dean of Creighton University School of Law. "I knew of their interest, but didn't fully appreciate the depth of commitment that some corporations have."

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The speakers also encouraged law firms to think outside of the box when it came to recruiting. Research by the Minority Corporate Counsel Association has demonstrated that the traditional indicators of performance, such as grades and law review credentials, are not good predictors of a person's success in large law firms. In fact, a substantial percentage of the most successful lawyers didn't graduate in the upper half of the class and were not on *Law Review*, but rather possessed the motivation and other skills that made them successful. The speakers encouraged firms to examine and expand their interviewing and hiring criteria to consider alternate skills and experiences that law students may possess.

"Grades are important, but it's not all about good grades," Gerrard said. "Firms also need to see what else [the students] did in law school; how did they serve their community?"

The sessions presented during the summit served many func-

tions. There were sessions for Nebraska's legal employers on how to improve their efforts to recruit and retain attorneys of color, and for law students of color on navigating the legal culture and on employment opportunities in Nebraska. A panel discussion featured several of Nebraska's prominent lawyers of color on hiring and retention issues in Nebraska. A networking reception was held for Nebraska's legal community with minority law students, and an introduction was given to the *Legal Diversity Website*, which is a new venue for Nebraska's legal employers to specifically recruit attorneys of color. Students had access to a variety of legal professionals to whom they could ask questions and get hints about what firms are looking for. "It was an opportunity for them to listen and ask questions," Gerrard said.

"It was really nice for students," said Steven Willborn, dean of University of Nebraska College of Law. "They thought it was wonderful. There isn't a lot of chance for them to come in contact with judges, large and

small firms. This also tells students that 'we think you're important.'"

"We received feedback from students and it was very positive," Borchers said. "They did a good job getting students and employers together. In the breakout sessions they got to talk to employers, and the firms got to find out what they can do to be more attractive to a broader range of students. It's like the metaphor of the blind man and the elephant. We all have a different perception. This let us get together so we could get a full picture of the legal profession.

The website is also a good thing."

Everyone *The Daily Record* spoke to agreed that this shouldn't be a one-time event. "Everyone left the summit energized," said Michael Leahy of Stinson Morrison Hecker. "I think I'd like to see this become an annual event."

"My expectations were fairly high for this summit, and it exceeded them," Gerrard said. "I would anticipate that a summit like this will be held regularly."

The summit was funded by the Kutak Foundation, the National Bar Institute, the Ne-

braska State Bar Association and the Minority and Justice Implementation Committee. Numerous members of Nebraska's legal community including Creighton University School of Law, The University of Nebraska College of Law, the Nebraska State Bar Association, the Midlands Bar Association, the Nebraska Hispanic Bar Association, the Supreme Court, Minority and Justice Implementation Committee, and numerous law firms contributed their time, talent and energy to ensuring the success of this event.