

## Diversity – Law Firms

### Spotlight On Diversity At Proskauer

The Editor interviews **Louie Rodriguez**, Director of Diversity and Inclusion at Proskauer Rose LLP.

**Editor:** Would you please tell us about your background?

**Rodriguez:** I started my career as an associate at Paul Hastings in their New York City litigation department, where I also had been a summer associate. While working there, I had been involved with Paul Hastings's diversity committee, a concept about which I had become increasingly more passionate, so I decided to make a career switch. I went to work for a non-profit organization, Sponsors for Educational Opportunity (SEO), which focuses on diversity both in higher educational institutions and in corporate America, including investment banks, law firms and consulting firms. At SEO, I managed their Corporate Law Firm Program – a summer internship program, where I recruited, trained and mentored college students of color planning to go to law school. While managing that program, I made several contacts with top law firms in New York City, including Proskauer. After introducing SEO to Proskauer, the firm came on board as an SEO intern firm. They accepted two interns then, and they continue to sponsor two interns every summer. Through my work with SEO, I learned about an open position for a campus relations manager at Proskauer. Just a few months into that position, the firm asked me to become Director of Diversity and Inclusion, a position that I have enjoyed for the past two years.

**Editor:** How does Proskauer's diversity program work?

**Rodriguez:** It's overseen and managed by our Diversity Steering Committee (DSC). Co-chaired by Proskauer Chairman Allen Fagin and Boston partner Jamieel Poindexter, the DSC directs and evaluates the firm's diversity activities in all of our offices. The composition of the committee is very diverse, which we believe is important to its success, and includes representatives from each of our offices around the country and our seven affinity group co-chairs. We also have members who reflect staff, recruiting and pro bono perspectives, whose initiatives often overlap with the DSC.

**Editor:** Let's talk more about Proskauer's affinity groups. How do these work within the context of the firm's commitment to diversity?

**Rodriguez:** The firm has seven affinity groups, a significant number for a law firm. Among these are the Asian Lawyer Affinity Group, Black Lawyer Affinity Group, Flex-Time Lawyer Affinity Group, Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Lawyer Affinity Group, Religious Observers Affinity Group and the Women's Affinity Group. These groups represent different facets of the Proskauer community, and each makes its own important contribution. For example, the Women's Affinity Group has taken a very strong role in creating developmental and networking opportunities for its members. Not only do they co-sponsor events with the other groups, but they are about to launch a new lunchtime speaker series

aimed at sharing with junior associates the kind of professional development information that is often reserved for mid-level and senior associates.

These seven groups essentially enhance the firm's diversity initiative by creating events and tailoring them to certain needs. Because the events are open to all lawyers and sometimes staff at the firm, the groups serve as resources not only to the members of the groups, but also to the firm itself. They are active groups with strong leaders.

**Editor:** I understand that Proskauer has several pipeline initiatives in different cities. Would you tell us about a few of them?

**Rodriguez:** One is here in New York City. A couple of years ago, we adopted a school in the Bronx called the Bronx School for Law, Government and Justice. That program has grown to become one of the firm's proudest achievements in the diversity pipeline area. It is a multi-faceted initiative that includes a mentoring program in which we pair lawyers and staff with high school juniors.

We mentor the high school students through the Gates Millennium Scholarship application process, a very demanding scholarship to apply for. The scholarship grants full tuition for all four years of college with the potential for some post-graduate tuition as well, and the application process is very intense. In addition to extensive paperwork, there are eight essays required, and both our staff and our lawyers help mentor a student through that entire process. In fact, last year, one of the students was awarded a Gates Millennium Scholarship and is now a freshman at Columbia University. We hope to track her progress because her career goal is to be a lawyer, and we would be delighted to recruit her to Proskauer. We also sponsor a career day when we show tenth grade students the different career options in a law firm, including not only lawyers but also paralegals, staff, finance, IT and recruiting.

One other pipeline program is a new one that we just started in Boston. There is an organization called the Boston Lawyers Group (BLG), which focuses on law firm diversity. They have a 1L diversity clerkship program that we have just agreed to participate in. BLG places 1L students of color at local law firms for the first five weeks of the summer and at government organizations for the last half. We hope that the program will create a pipeline of diversity for us in our Boston office, and we hope to bring back a student as a 2L summer associate and, ultimately, as a full-time associate. Those are just two of the pipeline initiatives in which we participate. We also have several others in our other offices.

**Editor:** Your first diversity scholar, Van Ann Bui, was named this past fall. Would you tell us about Proskauer's new Diversity Scholarship?

**Rodriguez:** We are very excited about launching this new scholarship, which is designed to help recruit top talent to the firm. When we saw Van Ann come through the pipeline, we knew that she was someone whom we had to recruit very quickly. Otherwise, she would have been recruited by one of the many other top firms looking for great talent. Van Ann joined us last

summer through the New York City Bar 1L diversity fellowship program and was a fantastic addition to the summer class. We are delighted that she will join us this year as a summer associate, and we look forward to having her join our full-time associate program after she graduates from Columbia Law School. We think that the scholarship is not only a sign of our investment in talented law students, but also of our commitment to diversity.

**Editor:** Once you have hired a diverse lawyer, what kind of mentoring do you have within the firm?

**Rodriguez:** Although our mentor program was designed with diversity in mind, the firm has one universal mentoring program that is open to all associates. We create a pairing of a partner-mentor with an associate-mentee to maximize the relationship by opening the lines of communication between them. Proskauer is a believer in providing not only formal mentoring opportunities, but also informal mentoring opportunities that either spin off from the formal program or that we create in addition to them. We ensure that our associates receive the mentoring that they need from people who have had very successful careers here at Proskauer.

**Editor:** Have you seen progress in addressing diversity in many different levels of the firm?

**Rodriguez:** In the past few years, we have seen a lot of progress through an intensifying of diversity efforts. For example, Proskauer created the role of Director of Diversity and Inclusion and added a second staff member as Diversity Coordinator, two roles that did not exist just a few years ago. To have two full-time staff members devoted entirely to diversity is a great sign of commitment and resources. Also, we have recharged and restructured the firm's seven affinity groups by adding a co-chair to each to share the responsibility. We also support these seven groups by sponsoring their attendance at conferences and seminars and the co-hosting of in-house events. As previously mentioned, Allen Fagin, our firm's chairman, is co-chair of the Diversity Steering Committee, and we are in constant communication with him about our activities.

Finally, we have tried to broaden our range of programs and events, and we have created a new diversity newsletter. We circulate the newsletter not only internally, but also to clients and to law students to communicate our various initiatives and efforts. All of our materials can be found on our Web site as well. We have created other marketing pieces, including one that is focused on our commitment to the LGBT community and one highlighting our commitment to our flex-time program. We also sponsor events for outside organizations such as non-profits and bar associations.

**Editor:** Have you received any client feedback on your initiatives?

**Rodriguez:** Over the past 18 months, we have seen an increasing number of RFPs from our clients that ask more questions about diversity. Hence, I believe that our clients are starting to take a greater interest

in what we, their outside counsel, are doing in terms of diversity. These questions have moved beyond headcounts to asking about the broad range of events that firms are hosting and the quality of these programs. We hope to go further than answering these diversity questions by partnering with our clients to co-host events or meet with them to discuss how to produce diversity in both the in-house legal world and in law firms.

**Editor:** How do you actually mark yourselves in terms of success?

**Rodriguez:** There are several ways that we measure our success. Of course, numbers are always a helpful tool, and we do produce reports on diversity across all sorts of measures. However, beyond the numbers, we consider informal feedback. We do this in various ways that help us determine whether a program is doing well or needs tweaking. For example, when we hold in-house diversity events, we always receive feedback from attendees and participants that helps us determine if an event could have been better. When our lawyers attend outside diversity events that we have sponsored, we receive formal feedback as to how we can best maximize that relationship.

We also measure success in terms of our individual lawyers' successes. We have had many of our women lawyers and lawyers of color named to "Top Lawyer," "40 Under 40" and other prominent lists in addition to being appointed to important state and local government positions or leadership roles in bar associations and other community groups. Also, work done by members of our LGBT Affinity Group and others at the firm has been recognized by state governments in same-sex marriage equality efforts, and for the past two years, Proskauer has been named one of the "Best Places to Work" by the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index, a measurement of equality and access for LGBT employees in the workplace.

**Editor:** Have you found a good business case for diversity?

**Rodriguez:** Diversity is a fundamental driver of Proskauer's business model. Our primary goal is high-quality service to our clients, and we think that a diverse team creates strong results. We are constantly looking to enhance our diversity to present a variety of thought and perspective to meet our client's needs.

**Editor:** Where do you see diversity initiatives and new programs in 2010? How about further down the road?

**Rodriguez:** I think that diversity initiatives and new programs will continue to be both more client focused and more professional development focused. Not so long ago, many diversity initiatives focused primarily on social activities. Internal networking and socializing at the law firm is an important part of diversity, but in the past few years we have seen a shift. There is more of a focus on the professional development and skill building of our diversity lawyers to help them rise through the ranks to have successful careers at Proskauer.