



# **The Atlanta Bar Association’s Minority & Diversity Clerkship Program Changing the Face of the Atlanta Legal Community**

By [G. Wayne Hillis, Jr.](#) (July 10, 2014)

In 1985, long before diversity and inclusion were the “hot” and compelling topics they are today, the Atlanta Bar Association, under the leadership of then-president Seaborn Jones, established the Minority & Diversity Clerkship Program.<sup>[1]</sup> Seaborn and his fellow leaders at the bar association recognized that the lack of diversity in the Atlanta legal community, especially at major law firms, was a critical problem. The number of associates and partners from minority groups in major Atlanta firms was unacceptably low and had not increased significantly in the previous 10 years. Seaborn and the other forward-thinking leaders at the bar association saw an opportunity to establish a program that could promote necessary change. Long before diversity committees, diversity statements, diversity programs and action plans, and diversity task forces were in vogue, the Atlanta Bar Association took the lead in promoting and increasing diversity in the Atlanta legal community.

The Atlanta Bar Association’s Minority & Diversity Clerkship Program was the first such program in the country, and it has inspired other state and local bar associations to develop similar programs. The basic purpose of the program is to provide first-year law students from traditionally underrepresented minority groups with the opportunity to clerk during the summer with an Atlanta law firm, corporate legal department or judge, to gain valuable “real world” legal

experience, and to make contacts in the Atlanta legal community. The program's three objectives are:

- To increase and integrate the number of minority and diverse attorneys practicing in Atlanta law firms by facilitating their placement in first-year summer clerkships;
- To supplement the students' clerkship experience with such support functions as skills development and formal and informal networking sessions; and
- To assist Atlanta law firms in their efforts to place minority and diverse law students in clerkships, and to increase the number of minority and diverse attorneys in practice in those and other law firms throughout Atlanta and Georgia.

Since the program's inception, the bar association has worked closely with Georgia's accredited law schools – The University of Georgia School of Law, Emory University School of Law, Georgia State University College of Law, Mercer University School of Law, and Atlanta's John Marshall Law School – and Atlanta area law firms and corporate legal departments to place as many minority and diverse first-year law students as possible. In the program's 29-year history, it has placed over 285 students in summer clerkships at 54 Atlanta law firms and corporate legal departments. In 2011, the program began placing additional students in judicial summer clerkships, and in the last four years, 11 state court judges have participated in the program. The Atlanta Bar Foundation and the Atlanta Bar Lawyer Referral & Information Service provide grants to fund the salaries for the judicial clerks.

Students from Georgia's five accredited law schools apply for the program each February. Each student submits an application, which includes a resume, first semester grades, and a personal statement explaining why the student should be accepted into the program. For the 2014 program, 118 students submitted applications. The program co-chairs review the applications and select the top 40 to 50 applications. Those applications are sent to the participating law firms, who rate the candidates. Based on those ratings, the program co-chairs select the applicants to be interviewed by the participating firms. At interview/selection night, each of the participating firms interviews several candidates and selects the student they will host for the summer. The clerkships are for a full or half-summer as determined by the participating firm. Other than making sure work is assigned commensurate with their experience, no other distinctions are made between the first-year clerks from the program and the firm's other clerks.

Improving diversity in the bar requires leadership at the highest level, and in its 29-year history, the program has been led by many prominent Atlanta lawyers. Seaborn Jones established the Program, and has co-chaired it for the last several years. Charles Lester, former president of the State Bar of Georgia and one of the founders of the State Bar of Georgia Diversity Program, also has co-chaired the program for the last several years. Prior chairs include the Honorable Leah Ward Sears, the first woman and youngest person to serve as a judge on the Fulton County Superior Court, the first woman and youngest person to serve as a justice on the Georgia Supreme Court, and the first woman to win a contested statewide election in Georgia.

Participants in the program, both law students and law firms, reap tremendous benefits from it. Summer clerkships have always been difficult to come by for first-year law students, and the

opportunities have diminished severely over the last several years due to the financial collapse and its dramatic impact on law firm recruiting nationwide. Yet, the Atlanta Bar Association's Minority & Diversity Clerkship Program provides approximately 20 to 25 first-year clerkship opportunities every year. The students receive a valuable opportunity to clerk with a law firm or corporate legal department. They work in a professional, legal environment, gain legal experience and maturity, and make valuable contacts in the Atlanta legal community. Nirouz Elhammali, a recent graduate from Emory University School of Law, describes her experience this way: "The program was instrumental in shaping my career. The job search for a first-year clerkship was deflating, as there were not many opportunities for 1Ls. Through the Minority & Diversity Clerkship Program, I had a great summer clerkship experience, and all of my subsequent professional achievements have flowed from that opportunity. It is a powerful program."

The program also benefits the participating law firms. It provides them with a guaranteed opportunity to host a diverse candidate for the summer – a feat that too often has proved challenging, especially for small-to-medium sized law firms competing for large-firm talent. Besides the value gained from exposing the firms to the benefits of a more diverse workforce, participating firms receive a valuable "leg up" on the law firm competition by getting an early opportunity – before the second-year recruiting process even begins – to work with and develop a relationship with a qualified diverse candidate. The program also helps the firms stay focused on creating and maintaining a culture of and commitment to diversity and inclusiveness, which is critical to their future success. This in turn undoubtedly impacts the first-year students and motivates them to actively assist the firm in its diversity and inclusiveness efforts. For example, Raj Shah, a graduate from The University of Georgia School of Law, was so impressed by his experience clerking through the program that, after joining the host firm as a permanent associate, he joined and actively contributed to that firm's diversity committee.

The Minority & Diversity Clerkship Program's 29-year record of success is remarkable, and it has overcome many obstacles. Most significantly, the program has weathered the impact of the recent economic collapse on law firms and the clients they serve. Many law firms have eliminated or substantially reduced law school recruiting, so the opportunities for 1L summer clerkships are much more limited. The program also has experienced a positive challenge: competition. Many law firms now recruit diverse candidates through robust proprietary diversity programs and initiatives, as well as through other minority and diversity recruitment programs such as the Southeastern Minority Job Fair. Despite these challenges, the Atlanta Bar Association's program and its participating firms continue to successfully place first-year students from underrepresented minority groups in summer clerkships, which assists in the development of a valuable pipeline of diverse 2L summer clerks with substantive legal experience and exposure. As a result, the program benefits not just the hosting law firms and corporate legal departments, but the Atlanta bar at large.

The Atlanta Bar Association's Minority & Diversity Clerkship Program commends the American Bar Association's Law Practice Management Division on its decision to focus the July issue of its webzine, *Law Practice Today*, on diversity and inclusion. It is important for the legal community to continue its focus on diversity and inclusion because, while progress has been made over the last almost three decades, there is still much work to be done. Only through

continued commitment to and honest discussion of diversity and inclusion issues, and the success of programs like the Atlanta Bar Association's Minority & Diversity Clerkship program, will our industry ever reach the level of diversity and inclusion for which we all strive.

*<sup>[1]</sup> The Atlanta Bar Association Minority & Diversity Clerkship Committee is co-chaired by G. Wayne Hillis, Jr., Charles T. Lester, W. Seaborn Jones, and Curtis J. Martin II.*

### **About the Author**



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