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Advancing Diversity and Inclusion in the Legal Profession: 'We Can Do Better'

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It is unquestionably important for the legal profession to be diverse and inclusive to adequately represent and serve the many communities that form our society. Despite this, increasing diversity in the legal profession, especially in the upper ranks, has progressed slowly. Throughout my career, I have

seized opportunities to advance women and minorities, and to understand and pursue effective strategies for progress.

An early instance occurred in 1999 when I participated in the Cuban American Bar Association's efforts, under the direction of then-CABA board member and later president Victor A. Diaz, to maintain Florida's hybrid system of electing local judges and appointing judges. I was tasked with debating on public television those professionals who sought to limit the selection of judges by the Judicial Nominating Commission. CABA and others successfully opposed the plan as it gave the members of the JNC too much power. My concern was that the proposed plan would be at odds with increasing the number of minorities and women serving on the bench in Florida and would make the process very political. Although the system of electing trial judges is certainly not perfect, I still support a hybrid system.

Another meaningful example of my sustained determination to increase the diversity of our judiciary happened throughout 2005. That year, I traveled on a monthly basis with attorney Luis E. Suarez, then a CABA board member, to meet with leaders of the voluntary bar associations to increase the diversity of the Broward Circuit Court trial bench. The Broward bench did not reflect the rich diversity of the community. The voluntary bars worked together to encourage then-Gov. Jeb Bush to appoint minorities to the bench. Bush answered the call and appointed numerous qualified minority candidates. Unfortunately, the next election wiped out a lot of those gains. We need to do more to educate voters about the importance of local judicial races.

I have served as the managing partner of my firm Kozyak, Tropin & Throckmorton, during two terms: in 2011-2012 and 2018-2019. The number of emails and letters of support I received for that appointment was astonishing. During my first term, there were very few women serving as managing partners. KTT, however, has been strategic and intentional about providing a path for advancement for women and minorities. I was not the first minority appointed to lead the firm and I was not the last. In fact, Javier A.

Lopez, 2017 CABA president, is KTT's current managing partner.

Many of you reading this will not be surprised by these developments as one of KTT's founders, John W. Kozyak, has made diversity the hallmark of our firm. He has devoted his entire career to mentoring and promoting women and minorities. Since its inception, KTT's core values have been diversity, inclusion and excellence. Those values are reflected in the composition and caliber of our partners and attorneys. In my opinion, we are at a turning point in the legal profession in which naming a minority as managing partner should be expected, and is advisable for any firm that wants to be viewed as forward-thinking. Every firm has a personality and the person leading the firm will set the tone.

I believe it is critical for leaders within law firms to work every day on ensuring that their organizations are diverse and reflect the communities they serve, and are inclusive, providing opportunities for advancement and mentorship. It is equally important for firms to work with other firms and organizations in the legal industry to achieve real sustained progress in the advancement of diversity and inclusion in the legal profession. Working together we can achieve more and at a greater scale. There is nothing more powerful than leaders and organizations working collectively towards the same goal to change the status quo.

Currently, I serve as the president of the Florida Association of Managing Partners, an organization comprised of managing partners from mid-sized law firms in Florida. I am proud of the statement that FAMP issued earlier this month, and the commitment of the 20 law firms who signed on to the statement to recognize that diversity and inclusion are more important than ever in light of the recent social unrest and ensuing protests.

As the statement concludes, "lawyers are trained to argue, debate and advocate. At this time, however, we need to listen more than we need to talk. We need and want to do more. We need to embrace diversity of thought. We need to be kind to one another. We need to take steps to make sure that the

legal profession, at all levels, reflects the rich diversity of our community. We can do better. We must do better. We will do better.”

We have made progress, but we need to do more. As leaders, it is our responsibility to push for the continued evolution within our organizations and to find ways to work together to provide diverse people a sense of belonging to our legal community.

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