

Gratitude, Pride, and Concern as I Approach the End of My Time as PDLG Co-President

December 6, 2022

By Leslie E. John

As I approach the end of four years as the co-president of the Philadelphia Diversity Law Group, (PDLG) the words that come to mind are gratitude, pride and, paradoxically, concern.


I have gratitude for the many lawyers, legal professionals, students and others that show up every day to make all of the programs PDLG runs a reality—from the flagship Fellows Program that places first-year law students in our member law firms and corporate legal departments; to boot camp that teaches incoming law students how to succeed in law school; and to the protégé advocate program that aims to give lawyers the tools to advance to partnership. PDLG is a volunteer-led organization, and its success is contingent upon the efforts of all those who give back.

PDLG board members are engaged not only in our flagship programs but also in additional initiatives. Our in-house board members are currently engaged in a deep dive on steps they can take to attract diverse talent to their corporate law departments. They have also been engaged in considering what steps they can and should take to ensure that diverse law firm lawyers who lead their matters get appropriate origination credit at their firms. We all know how important credit is in ensuring the future success of diverse lawyers.

I am indebted to my co-president Maria Lewis, whose steady hand and good judgment will carry the organization forward, and Lois Kimbol, whose vision and ceaseless efforts have molded PDLG into the organization it is today.

But my gratitude is deeper than simply giving thanks. I am personally grateful to the PDLG community for the kinship each member of the community has extended to me. I have become a member of a community where our shared goals of creating opportunities, breaking down barriers and celebrating our successes and those of our diverse lawyers has transcended the daily pressures of law practice. I can only say that I have gotten back more than I have given, and I am grateful.

I have pride for the strides we have made over the past four years. PDLG has added law firm and corporate members—we now have over 30 law firms and 15 corporate members. Our newest law firm member is Hangley Aronchik Segal Pudlin & Schiller; and our newest corporate member is Fox Chase Cancer Center.



We count among our members the largest national and regional firms, boutique law firms, corporate law departments and educational institutions in greater Philadelphia. A full list of our members is at www.pdlg.net/about/.

Our number of Fellows increased to 47 first-year law students last summer, an all-time high. Attendance at our boot camp was at record numbers, and we launched the advocate-protégé program with an initial cohort of 10 protégés. All this happened while a global pandemic was raging and we transitioned to online programs. During the first summer of the pandemic, I am proud that we kept our Fellows Program intact, offered stipends to those students who saw their jobs evaporate, and ran new and innovative programming to support all of our Fellows. PDLG now has a roster of over 650 alumni of our Fellows Program, including the city solicitor of Philadelphia, lawyers that started as Fellows and became partners at our member law firms, general counsels of regional companies, and entrepreneurs of businesses and nonprofits.

So, there is much to celebrate. But there is also cause for concern. The prevalence of hate crimes has surged, racial inequities persist unabated, income inequality has increased, and violence plagues our Black communities. The murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor were less than three years ago yet I fear the social movement their murders awakened has lost momentum amid stiff headwinds. I worry about the efforts to restrict voting rights and to reverse educational reform necessary to ensuring access to educational opportunities. I am fearful that crimes against transgender people will continue in the current super-charged political atmosphere.

If we find ourselves in a recession and a downturn in the legal market will we lose the fortitude that real change requires? It is when times are difficult, not easy, that we will see if we are truly committed. In each previous downturn in the legal market, forward progress stalled. The numbers of diverse lawyers at our firms and corporate legal departments decreased and promotions slowed. What we need now is for our leaders to renew their commitment to the goals that PDLG enunciated over seven years ago:

- Strengthen recruiting programs for lawyers of color and other diverse lawyers by developing creative and effective strategies for increasing the pool of such candidates for positions at law firms and corporate law departments, and by intensifying efforts to recruit diverse candidates successfully at all levels.
- Ensure that lawyers of color and other diverse lawyers have access to meaningful and challenging assignments, and that all attorneys receive their fair share of significant and visible roles on matters of importance to clients.
- Maintain fair and unbiased systems for assigning and evaluating legal work that will provide all of a law firm's or corporate law department's lawyers with an equal opportunity to develop the skills necessary to provide the best possible service to clients, and to compete successfully for internal promotions and opportunities in the legal market generally.
- Develop viable sponsorship programs that will include lawyers of color and other diverse lawyers.
- Appoint more lawyers of color and other diverse lawyers to leadership and managerial positions at firms and corporate law departments.
- Ensure that the attorney leader of the corporate law department's or law firm's diversity and inclusion efforts has regular access and the opportunity to provide advice to the law firm's governing committee or, in the case of corporate law departments, to the company's chief legal officer.

As equity has taken on greater prominence in our efforts since 2015, we must add to those goals an examination of whether all lawyers have access to resources and opportunities that lead to success.

To move forward on increasing diversity, equity and inclusion among our member law firms and corporate law departments now is the time to renew our commitments.

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