Recently I had the opportunity to speak with a racially diverse group of low-income Pennsylvania citizens about their view of our profession, and what I learned astounded me. Although they didn’t articulate it using the same words, they viewed our profession as elitist, disconnected from their existence and under-concerned about diversity.

After the public discussion, a middle-aged woman with blonde hair and sky-blue eyes approached me and conveyed to me her appreciation for my participation in the workshop. She had one suggestion, which was that I should use the term “low-income” rather than “poor” because she considered herself low-income, not poor. She explained that the term “poor” had such a negative connotation attached to it that she preferred to disassociate from the term. I graciously accepted her comment as I knew it was an attempt on her part to escape the harsh and often unconscious bias that the privileged impose on the less privileged. We often view poor people as undeserving of the privileges we have and blame their condition on a lack of personal responsibility. She wanted me to know that she was a hard-working person who simply had not escaped poverty. I related to her as she did to me because I had shared with the group that I come from very humble beginnings in rural Oklahoma.

I was also greeted by another woman who proceeded to tell me how proud of me she was, all while calling me “sister” and giving me an affectionate hug, which I gladly returned despite the fact that I had never met her before. She ended her commentary by telling me how glad she was to see me at the front of the room, and she encouraged me to keep speaking “truth to power,” a reference that informed me that despite her admitted lack of formal education, she was obviously versed in the literature regarding the struggle for equality. She was an older African-American woman and, although we had never met before, she connected with me and I with her because of our shared experience and mutual respect for each other as black women.

Reflecting upon those brief encounters reminded me of something that I take for granted — diversity in the legal profession. Through the National Bar Association, the Pennsylvania Bar Association’s Minority Bar Committee and the Philadelphia Barristers Association, I have had the opportunity to interact with countless lawyers of color, both in Pennsylvania and otherwise. In doing so, I have become somewhat complacent about the extent of diversity in the profession. Others in our profession appear to have a misconception of diversity in the profession.

I recently heard an African-American male partner at a large law firm speak about the dearth of minority lawyers in large firms, and he openly asserted that there was adequate diversity in other spheres of the profession, but not in large corporate law firms. But a recent report from the American Bar Association reminds us that we cannot afford complacency if we value diversity in the legal profession. In the third edition of Miles to Go: Progress of Minorities in the Legal Profession, published by the ABA’s Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Legal Profession, the ABA reminds us that we cannot take diversity for granted. According to the report, the number of minority students matriculating at law schools has decreased...
in the past two years, and the legal profession remains one of the least racially inte-
grated professions in the United States. In the year 2000, African-Americans made up only 3.9 percent of all lawyers in the
country, despite the fact that they were nearly 13 percent of the total population.

I often think that if I were white I wouldn’t care much about diversity, so I have to
ask myself, “Why should all lawyers care about diversity in the legal profession?”
The workshop participants answered this question for me — because our citizens care. The black woman who embraced me at the workshop was glad to see that I am
in the legal profession giving voice to issues that concern her and doing so from
a black woman’s perspective. No, I don’t speak for all black women, and there is
no essential black woman, but having black women in the profession ensures that the voices of black women are heard, even if they are saying different things.
Likewise, the “low-income” woman was glad to see me in a position trying to
bring about change for low-income people in Pennsylvania. These two women reminded me that diversity in
the legal profession gives comfort to our diverse citizenry. It assures our citizens
that the creators and administrators of legal institutions will not suffer from
race and class homogeneity that could unintentionally result in cases, statutes
and policies that merely maintain race and wealth privilege rather than create
new opportunities for achieving equality.

Diversity enhances the profession because lawyers from underprivileged socioeco-
nomic backgrounds or racially subordi-
nated classes have a personally vested
interest in addressing issues of equality.
Moreover, as lawyers they can “speak
truth to power” because they stand in
a position of knowledge and power to
challenge those comfortable with the
status quo. The white woman at the
workshop was glad that I was there
because she knew that as a former “low-
income” farm girl from rural Oklahoma,
I understand poverty as a multi-faceted
systemic condition imposed on people
rather than a condition brought on
themselves solely by their own behavior.
She understood that as a result of my
experience, I am more likely to be critical
of legal institutions that do not create
adequate opportunity for hard-working
people to escape the oppression of poverty
or to find legal representation when they
need it.

Diversity in the form of race, class
and gender integration within the legal
profession is essential to honoring the
sacred trust of our citizenry and ensuring
a commonwealth that lives up to its
egalitarian ideals. And from what I gather
from the ABA report, we cannot afford to
become complacent because we continue
to have “miles to go.”

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