Remarks of PBA President-elect Thomas G. Wilkinson Jr.
Sixth Annual PBA Diversity Summit
October 27, 2011
Hilton Hotel
Harrisburg

Good morning, distinguished judges, colleagues and friends:

As President-elect of the Pennsylvania Bar Association, I am pleased to welcome you to our Sixth Annual Diversity Summit. We are proud to sponsor this important conference.

In particular, I want to acknowledge the leadership and commitment of PBA Minority Bar Committee co-chairs Jackie Martinez and Wes Payne, and Diversity Summit Co-Chairs Andrea Farney and Rhodia Thomas in assembling an outstanding program that promotes a unique – and necessary – examination of the critical issues involved in promoting diversity and inclusion in all sectors of the legal community.

Indeed, as the Summit’s theme so aptly reflects, diversity and inclusion is everyone’s business. For more than twenty years, it has been the business of the PBA Minority Bar Committee, the PBA Women in the Profession, the PBA Civil and Equal Rights Committee, and the PBA Gay and Lesbian Rights Committee. I’d like to salute the many leaders and members of these committees who have been pioneers in the statewide effort.

Thanks to their good work and the vision of PBA leaders such as Cliff Haines, Gretchen Mundorf and current PBA President Matt Creme, the PBA has made major strides this year through the appointment of a Diversity Task Force to ensure that our bar association is truly a bar association for everyone.

I am pleased to report that, as a result of House of Delegates’ approval of the recommendations of this very active task force, the PBA amended its Bylaws to create a new seat on the Board of Governors for a second Minority At-Large Governor. This additional Minority At-Large Governor has all of the rights and privileges as the other At-Large Governors, including a seat on the PBA Nominating Committee.

The House also amended the PBA Bylaws to change the composition of the PBA Nominating Committee to create one seat for a representative of the Gay and Lesbian Rights Committee and the Legal Services to Persons with Disabilities Committee, which will rotate between these two groups each year and will be selected by the members of the respective committee.

The Diversity Task Force also recommended the creation of a PBA Diversity Team, whose mission is to promote and enhance diversity initiatives within the PBA. This team of thirteen diversity ambassadors represents a broad range of PBA committees, sections, divisions and commissions, and we expect that it will be a catalyst for ongoing examination, outreach and promotion of diversity efforts throughout our association.

I also am pleased to advise that the PBA has appointed its first full-time Diversity Officer, Janis Leftridge, a lawyer who has worked for many years in human resources in the private sector. In doing so, the PBA is one of the first statewide bars to make such a commitment. You will hear from Janis shortly, but I want to tell you that she already is making substantial changes to the PBA landscape.

In her first month on the job, Janis reviewed the PBA Bylaws and could not find any mention of diversity. She made a recommendation to the Diversity Task Force for the inclusion of promoting diversity in the Purpose paragraph of the Articles of Incorporation. This recommendation was approved by the PBA Board of Governors and will be considered by the PBA House of Delegates at its Nov. 18 meeting.
Just earlier this week, the PBA unveiled a brand new “Diversity Resource” area on the PBA website at www.pabar.org. This site offers valuable links to information about diversity programs within the PBA and local and state and specialty bar associations.

Two weeks ago, Dean Linda Ammons of Widener University Law School hosted a reception to introduce Janis to Harrisburg’s legal and educational community, underscoring the importance of strengthening joint diversity efforts between the organized bar and law schools.

And, finally, Janis will continue to work closely with the PBA Diversity Team to promote and enhance existing diversity initiatives. I hope all of you will welcome her and will give her your support, suggestions and assistance.

While we can take pride in the important strides we took this year in our diversity efforts, we fully appreciate that this association and the profession have a shared responsibility to promote diversity and inclusion in all facets of the profession.

As lawyers, we must also recognize a very important fact: As America’s population grows more diverse, its citizens need to have officers of the court with whom they can identify. Today, the legal profession must be as varied and diverse as the public it serves so as to retain its role as the connecting link to the Rule of Law – for the appearance of justice is just as important as justice itself.

In the next fifty years, the general population is projected to be about fifty percent people of color, but enrollment in American law schools is less than twenty percent students of color.

The latest U.S. census figures show that today Latinos account for sixteen percent of the U.S. population, but comprise only four percent of its lawyers. In the next decade, it is estimated that seventy-five percent of new workers will most likely be from Asia. The U.S. and Europe combined will provide only fifteen percent of the world's new labor force. These figures are not just a matter of race or ethnicity; they are a demographic shockwave that is set to revolutionize nations and markets.

These trends suggest that the proportion of minorities in the legal profession is not likely to attain parity with that in the general population in the foreseeable future.

The PBA leadership views supporting diversity as including addressing the concerns of women in the profession. A recent New York Times editorial noted that when Sandra Day O’Connor ascended to the Supreme Court thirty years ago, many thought the law profession’s glass ceiling would be shattered. Instead, the Times said, the profession is still resistant to putting women in leadership positions and many women have abandoned the law altogether. Women make up less than one-third of American lawyers, even though they have made up almost half of new law-school graduates for two decades. In law firms, forty-five percent of the women lawyers are associates and only fifteen percent are equity partners.

At the same time, despite efforts to make law firms more inclusive, diverse attorneys continue to leave law firms in disproportionate numbers. The National Association for Law Placement’s 2009 Associate Attrition survey showed that 87 percent of racially and ethnically diverse lawyers left their firms.

When racial and ethnic minority law students graduate, they encounter little mentoring or opportunities for growth within law firms and often leave the profession, so that those twenty percent of the ethnically diverse students in law schools will translate to about fifteen percent in actual law practices.

As we move forward to address these challenges, let us remember that our mistakes and the inequities of the past must guide, and not control, our future.

For the future, we need to unite our law schools, our bar associations, our courts, and our law firms, large and small, in our mission to achieve a more racially, ethnically and gender diverse legal profession.

As you discuss ideas such as commitments to diversity by law-firm management, retention programs, changes in hiring practices and more, I encourage you to explore how we can move forward from aspiration to action. The future of our profession and the very fabric of our society will depend
upon our ability to work – with passion and commitment – to ensure that opportunities in this nation are available to all, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity or country of origin.

Thank you for your participation in this year’s Diversity Summit.

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