



Sharita Whitaker, left, Gerald Walden Jr. and Emma Kinyanjui gather at the Minority Pre-Law Conference.

Minorities In The Profession Committee Continues ‘Moving Forward’

By Russell Rawlings

For the Minorities in the Profession Committee of the North Carolina Bar Association, “Moving Forward” is more than just a tagline for its successful ¡Adelante! Moving Forward program, an annual event aimed at providing law students with the skills necessary to become successful attorneys.

Forward movement is woven into the fabric of every initiative this committee undertakes.

Most recently, this was evidenced by the committee’s 2nd Annual Minority Pre-Law Conference, held in March at North Carolina Central University School of Law. The conference, co-chaired by Emma Kinyanjui of NCCU School of Law and Gerald Walden Jr. of The Fresh Market, Inc., brought together minority

high school students and college students who are considering or already planning to attend law school.

Equipped with excellent panels of law school admissions officers, law students, and practicing attorneys, the event provided an in-depth perspective on what students can expect during law school and, perhaps more importantly, what they should do now to make that dream a reality.

The event also featured a mock law school class, law school fair, networking opportunities galore, and a keynote address from Wake County District Court Judge Vince Rozier.

The first iteration of this event, the “Diversity Conference,” was approximately four years ago and originally targeted only



Students visit with Anthony Ervin, director of admissions at NCCU School of Law.

those individuals providing career advice to students, such as high school guidance counselors and pre-law advisors. However, after two years of low attendance, Walden said, “we looked at it and decided that this was not the right audience.”

Borrowing from the examples set by similar programs in Texas and Virginia that address students who are not already in law school, Walden said the program was “repackaged” last year. The name was changed to the Minority Pre-Law Conference, and the target audience became those minority high school and college students who might be interested in attending law school.

According to Walden, last year’s attendance was definitely an improvement over the previous years, “but we didn’t have quite the promotion we needed last year for a large turnout. We stayed on it this year and what we put in place last year bore fruit.”

Approximately 100 students, attorneys and law school administrators attended this year’s event. Students came from all over North Carolina and Virginia. Word of the event even reached students in Florida.

“This year,” Walden said, “we added the mock class and the law school fair, both of which were extremely well received.”

For Walden, a previous recipient of the NCBA’s Citizen Lawyer Award and immediate past chair of the committee, promoting the good works and great deeds of the Minorities in the Profession Committee is a labor of love that he has pursued vigorously over the past eight years.

“I have been a member of the committee for a long period of time,” Walden said. “We had these great programs, but we didn’t have any recognition for them—no one really knew about them.”

Therefore, when he was appointed committee chair in 2013, one of Walden’s primary objectives was to elevate the profile of the committee. “You have to make sure people know what is going on so they will be energized and want to be involved.

“Over the last two years we made sure that there were constant references to the Minorities in the Profession in e-bar. We started taking pictures at and producing articles about our events, and people started talking about them. The committee also started hosting regular meet-and-greets for minority attorneys which served as a strong recruiting vehicle. As an in-house counsel, I did a lot of recruiting of corporate counsel members; for me that is a big opportunity and it still is.”

The effort is paying off.

“I have not been able to attend all of the meetings in person this year,” Walden said, “but I was able to make the last one, and it was surprising to me to see how many new faces there were. Word has gotten out! People have heard that the Minorities in the Profession Committee is the place to be for minority attorneys; this is the first stepping stone to many of these attorneys getting involved with the bar association.

“It doesn’t cost anything to join this committee once you are an NCBA member, and there are a variety of things going on



NCBA President Shelby Benton greets Vince Walton (left) and William Walton at an MIP Committee reception.



Niya Fonville of LANC-Raleigh moderates a panel discussion at the pre-law conference.

so there is something for everyone. From there you can decide where your path in the NCBA might lie to some degree. A lot of the new members are attorneys who are new to the area; a lot of them are students I taught (at NCCU School of Law) and those who attended iAdelante! events. The students are hearing about MIP and are joining after graduation and passing the bar exam.

“That remains one of the biggest opportunities—to continue to spread the word.”

Following two years as committee chair, Walden has passed the gavel to Sharita Whitaker of Smith Anderson in Raleigh.

“Sharita is doing a great job,” Walden said. “She is actually the person I selected to be my replacement. She has a lot of energy. We have put a lot of work into repackaging Minorities in the Profession during the last two years, and she is someone I could rely on very heavily to make sure that the momentum was not lost.

“I did not want MIP to lose steam and thought she would be a great one to ensure it didn’t. I have been impressed with Sharita from the very beginning. I call her ‘Every Woman’ because she is practicing law, expecting her third child, and successfully managing Minorities in the Profession.”

Whitaker, who was recently recognized by The News & Observer as its Tar Heel of the Week, is quick to recognize Walden and Kinyanjui for their leadership of the pre-law conference, and credits Walden in particular for encouraging her involvement in the committee.

“Gerald has been great,” Whitaker said. “I could not have had a better role model to follow. He has essentially taught me everything I know about the committee and inspired me to continue building with this very important committee.

“He encouraged me while I was just a committee member. I chaired a subcommittee and participated/assisted with a number of events, and he motivated me to become even more involved, which turned into my desire to follow in his footsteps by becoming chair for this bar year and the next. He laid a fantastic groundwork, and I have no problem saying that what he did during the two years prior to my becoming chair has made the MIP Committee more visible than it has been in years.

“From his marketing ideas, to making sure we put on programs that engaged the community, Gerald already created this wonderful model which I now follow. He is a great resource for me and for this committee, and I have nothing but positive comments about his leadership.”

Whitaker is a 2010 graduate of NCCU School of Law who interned at Smith Anderson after her second year of law school. When she joined the firm full time a year later, she immediately became involved with the Minorities in the Profession Committee.

“I was actually appointed to the MIP Committee by Martin Brinkley,” Whitaker said. “When he became president of the bar association, we sat down and talked, and he asked me what I was interested in. He said he would love to appoint me to the Minori-

ties in the Profession Committee, and from that day forward I have been a member of the committee.

“I thank Martin every time I see him, and he thanks me for allowing him to appoint me. So for as long as I have been practicing law, I have been a member of the committee.”

As a young attorney and a very, very young committee chair, Whitaker has the advantage of being only a few years removed from law school. She relates well to law students, undergraduates and high school students, such as those who attended the pre-law conference.

“I wish I had known about that program when I was in high school or college,” Whitaker said. “The information that was provided to those students at the pre-law conference ... there is no way to place a value on it. You hear the things you need to hear about getting good grades, the rigor of law school. When you eventually do go to law school, you will realize how important hard work and preparation really is.

“To have an opportunity to talk to a practicing attorney, to someone who has been through it ... I definitely think the pre-law conference was just fantastic.”

Whitaker added that each component of the program was important for high school and college students who are considering law school. And the law school fair gave the students an opportunity to speak directly with recruiters from six of the state’s seven law schools.

“All of those groups (the practicing attorneys, the law students, the recruiters, and the law school representatives) were important because each of them brought something different to the table,” Whitaker said. “The law students gave prospective stu-

dents a realistic look into what they will have to do to get into law school and be successful.

“The attorneys gave them a real world perspective into what your practice will be like and what the practice of law is like. And the law school deans, recruiters and other representatives gave them an opportunity to learn how to network and gain experience on preparation for law school.”

The fact that the prospective students gave up part of their Saturday to attend this program, Whitaker added, speaks well of their commitment.

“If you commit to putting in the time and effort it takes for success in the future,” Whitaker said, “giving up a Saturday to learn more about the law school experience and the practice of law is a positive thing.”

As she completes her first year as committee chair, Whitaker is excited about what the future holds for the Minorities in the Profession Committee.

“We have a number of different ideas for programs that we need to bring to life,” Whitaker said. “There is so much support from the bar leadership and the MIP Committee members themselves to create more programs.

“We want to focus more on practicing attorneys. We have a number of programs for students, so it is time to make sure we have good programming and events for our practicing attorneys. Retention is so important in the legal profession and especially here in North Carolina.

“We need to make sure we continue to grow and retain the wonderful minority attorneys we have in this state and to keep them involved with the NCBA.” *NCJ*



NCBA members toured the Carolina Basketball Museum at UNC-Chapel Hill before watching the Tar Heels take on the Wake Forest Demon Deacons at the Smith Center on Jan 21. The member event, organized by the NCBA Membership Department, drew a crowd of more than 200 members and guests.