The WSBA Leadership Institute

What Is It and Why **Should We Care?**

his year, as president of the WSBA, I am dealing with issues that are not those that I have customarily encountered during my career as a lawyer. As such, I am not able to operate on "automatic," which is easy to do when my daily life is routine. This year has certainly been anything but routine for me.

One of the things that I have always prided myself on is taking the time to reflect on my daily life to try to find the lessons that it presents for me. How often do we hear the adage, "you can't teach an old dog new tricks"? In my opinion, that is just an excuse not to learn from our experiences and not to have to accept accountability for what is going on around us. I believe we are never too old to learn, to adapt or modify our behavior, and to change our beliefs.

If one accepts the premise that there are lessons to learn from everything, why is it we all don't learn the same lessons? For me, the answer is diversity. We all come from different backgrounds and cultures and have had varying life experiences, so our perspectives are different. The key is being able to recognize and accept the differences. Difference does not equal bad. Difference is just different. This is one of the wonderful values of diversity. Common incidents can teach us many lessons depending upon our perspective. By sharing our beliefs, backgrounds, knowledge,



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etc., we are exposed to a richer, fuller experience. By gathering all these different points of view, we are able to collectively be more creative. We are better able to see the bigger picture and, thus, make better decisions and positively

influence those around us.

In looking at issues that have been center stage this year for the WSBA Board of Governors - such as racial bias in the criminal justice system, loss of employment opportunities for our members, increased demands for civil legal aid, violence by the police against people of color, and immigration law/ ethical rules debates - we have seen tremendous growth in our focus on diversity in our organization, but we still have such a long way to go.

The WSBA Leadership Institute (WLI) plays a big role in our diversity growth. The WLI is a leadership development program created in 2004 by the WSBA Board of Governors. Its founder was then-WSBA President Ronald Ward, whose passion and foresight got this program off the ground and sustained it through its early growing years. The original intent of this program was to give opportunity and training in leadership skills to women, minorities, and other young attorneys from traditionally under-represented groups. The mission statement of the WLI, in part, states that "Our goal is to have a class that reflects the full diversity of our state, which includes race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and geographic location."

Although there can only be a maximum of 12 fellows every year, the numbers are adding up. The WLI is only in its seventh year and already many of the graduates of this incredible, nationally acclaimed program are stepping up and utilizing the training, experience, and lessons learned through the WLI and are assuming leadership roles in their com-



The WSBA Leadership Institute Class of 2008 with Board members and Founder Ronald Ward (front row, seated, on right). Many WLI graduates have gone on to assume leadership roles in the Bar, the profession, and their communities.

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Tel: 425-452-1600 Fax: 425-452-5570 munities. As for the legal community, many have become presidents of various minority bar associations, chairs of WSBA committees, and in one case, a governor on the current WSBA Board of Governors. The WSBA continues to support this program because it makes a statement about our level of commitment to, and the extent to which we value, diversity. The impact these graduates can have on an entire community is immense.



By empowering these WLI graduates and encouraging and enabling them to become leaders and serve their communities and our profession, we all benefit from their life experiences, their knowledge of their respective communities and cultures, and their individual unique ways of viewing life and solving problems. Of course, by enabling in this way, those of us in the historical majority must be willing to recognize that there will be times when we are reminded that we are still largely unenlightened. We might make thoughtless and apparently insensitive statements. We may actually be insensitive. Those in the diversity community will hopefully recognize this and work together with us not to blame anyone for this ignorance, oversight, or insensitivity, but rather to use each of these occasions as learning experiences and opportunities to become more aware.

Acknowledging diversity and learning from different perspectives and points of view, empowering everyone in our Association to be a voice in our governance, and respecting each other is how we grow, as individuals, as an organization, and as a community. This is what the WSBA Leadership Institute is all about. So, why should we care about the WLI? We should care because it provides a continuing opportunity for growth for all of us and our future.

WSBA President Steven G. Toole can be reached at steve-wsba@sgtoolelaw.com or 425-455-1570.