

An 'unprecedented' push for The Boston Globe diversity



Mintz Levin hires, promotes several minority attorneys

By Diane E. Lewis, Globe Staff | August 5, 2005

A prominent Boston law firm has hired 11 minority attorneys to staff an employment law practice in Washington, D.C., and it is planning to add more to work in Boston, New York, and Washington in a push to diversify its ranks and boost business.

The move, by Mintz Levin Cohn Ferris Glovsky & Popeo, reflects one of the largest efforts by a major US law firm to aggressively recruit more than a handful of minorities to the positions of partner or counsel at any one time. Officials at the firm said the new recruits mark the beginning of a major diversity effort.

In addition, the firm has promoted two Asian associates in its Boston office to partners. Of the minority partners hired in Washington, D.C., since June, four are African-American and one is Latino. The firm now has 13 minority partners who represent 6.5 percent of its 198 partners. Last year, the firm had six minority partners. The rest of the new hires are of counsel or associates.

David Wilkins, the Kirkland & Ellis professor of law at Harvard Law School and director of The Program on the Legal Profession, called the minority hiring "unprecedented". He said, however, that the new attorneys' success will depend largely on how well they are integrated into the firm.

"I have been studying the careers of minority lawyers for 20 years now, and I have never heard of anything like this," said Wilkins. "The idea of putting together a practice group, with an eye toward making it heavily minority or with substantial representation of minorities, is unheard of. It strikes me as a very bold and promising strategy, but only time will tell whether these lawyers will become fully integrated into the firm."

Research from the National Association of Law Placement in

Washington, D.C., reveals that attorneys of color account for only 4.32 percent of all partners at major US law firms even though the percentage of minority law school graduates has doubled, increasing from 10 percent to 20 percent since the late 1980s.

In Boston, four of the top 10 firms, including Mintz Levin, have more minority partners than the national percentage. The others are Bingham McCutchen, with 29 or 8.6 percent of its 337 partners; Ropes & Gray, where 15 or 6.2 percent of its 243 partners are minorities, and Wilmer Cutler, which has 16 minority partners who account for 5.5 percent of its 289 partners, according to NALP.

Steven P. Rosenthal, comanaging partner at Mintz Levin, said his law firm's diversity efforts are just beginning.

"For us, the business case for diversity is compelling," he said. "These people and their practices are compelling. Each is bringing business with them, and we intend to support them so that they will bring more business to the firm. They also serve their clients as a team, and that is a model we will be using throughout our firm."

The decision to bring in the lawyers came after a Mintz Levin partner, Mo Cowan, received a call from a headhunter who wanted to recruit him. Cowan told Rosenthal, who contacted the headhunter, Ron Jordan, founder of the recruiting firm, Carter, White & Shaw in Chestertown, Md. After talks, Rosenthal hired Jordan in February.

"The firm gave me a set of parameters that I had never heard of before," said Jordan. "I was asked to find rainmakers and potential rainmakers who were diverse. I thought, 'Are you for real?' No one could believe that a Boston-based firm would extend this kind of opportunity. But you cannot be an advocate for the law in this society unless all people are represented."

Jordan said he contacted Edmund D. Cooke Jr., then a partner at the Washington law firm, Venable LLC, and a former attorney for the House of Representatives. Cooke agreed to meet Cherie R. Kiser, director of the firm's Washington office. Cooke, who for two years had tried to interest several big law firms in the idea of hiring a legal practice comprising a diverse group of attorneys, said he began to think seriously about the offer when Kiser asked what could be done to get him to move.

"I said that I'd leave if a firm would allow me to lead a diverse group of lawyers," he said.

Cooke said the approach of bringing an entire practice of diverse attorneys into a firm encourages young minority associates to stay because they have mentors to guide them and help them attract new business.

Robert L. Clayton, former associate dean at Tulane Law School and partner at Epstein, Becker & Green PC, said: "Our first responsibility will be to serve as role models because without mentors you will not learn how to build a book of business. That is not taught in law school." Clayton is also among the group that joined Mintz Levin at Cooke's urging. He is a partner.

Mintz also hired the following partners in Washington: Singleton B. McAllister, a former partner at Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal LLP, who also served as general counsel for the US Agency for International Development under President Clinton; Gilbert F. Casellas, former chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity

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Commission under Clinton; and O'Kelly E. McWilliams III, a former partner at Pepper Hamilton LLP.

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