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BUSINESS/FINANCIAL DESK

LEGAL BEAT; In Washington, Taking the Express Lane to Diversity

By **JONATHAN D. GLATER (NYT)** 945 words

Published: July 22, 2005

LARGE law firms are generally not diverse places. Even though law schools for years have produced graduates of increasingly varied backgrounds, these young lawyers seem not to stay long enough to rise through the ranks of senior associates and eventually become partners.

Partners at large firms loudly lament the situation and point out the one or two African-American partners they have, or the few Asian-Americans, or maybe even a few Hispanic-Americans. But the numbers tell the story: According to the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, for example, which released results of a voluntary survey of diversity at 82 New York-area law offices earlier this year, 4.7 percent of partners are members of minority groups, even though 21.1 percent of associates are.

All of this makes one Boston-based firm's aggressive move to build an employment law practice in Washington by hiring for mostly senior positions about a dozen lawyers -- nine of them African-American and one Hispanic -- that much more striking.

Mintz Levin Cohn Ferris Glovsky & Popeo has hired Edmund D. Cooke Jr., a former staff counsel for the United States House of Representatives and a former appellate advocate for the National Labor Relations Board; Gilbert F. Casellas, former chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; Singleton B. McAllister, former general counsel of the United States Agency for International Development; and nine others, so far, to join the firm's 52-lawyer Washington office. Mr. Cooke and Ms. McAllister are black and Mr. Casellas is Hispanic.

The road to the hirings, which raised the number of minority partners in the firm to 13 from 6, started late this winter with a persistent headhunter's calls to Mr. Cooke, one of the lawyers who will head the group at Mintz Levin. At the time, Mr. Cooke said, he was quite comfortable as a partner at another Washington law firm, Venable. Nonetheless, he met with the head of Mintz Levin's Washington office, Chérie R. Kiser. Mr. Cooke, interviewed in Mintz Levin's Midtown offices earlier this month, recalled that Ms. Kiser asked him an unusually open-ended question: "What would it take to get you to move?"

As it happened, Mr. Cooke had already come up with an answer to that question and had shopped his idea to Washington-area law firms in 2002 and 2003. None of them bit. The idea was to get a single firm to invest in hiring a group of diverse lawyers at once, to build a practice area and make money, of course, but also to achieve overnight what Mr. Cooke called a critical mass of lawyers who could be mentors for junior lawyers and move more of them into the partnership.

"There's a measure of risk for any firm in doing that," Mr. Cooke said, explaining why he had not been particularly hopeful that any firm would take on the challenge.

But within a week of the conversation with Ms. Kiser, he received a call from Steven P. Rosenthal, co-managing partner at Mintz Levin. The two men met for dinner at McCormick & Schmick's, a seafood restaurant in Washington. From there, talks advanced quickly.

For Mintz Levin, which has about 450 lawyers in offices in seven cities, hiring so many people at once is a multimillion-dollar investment, Mr. Rosenthal said. "In addition to hiring these individuals, we are also making a significant commitment to their practice," providing them with marketing and other support, he said. "It's not simply, here's a desk, here's a computer, here's a telephone, go forth

and produce business."

It was important that Mintz Levin agree to hire a group of lawyers together, said Ms. McAllister, who left the Washington office of Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal to come to the firm. Indeed, lawyers in the group moving to Mintz Levin said they called each other to make sure that all were on board; many were leaving lucrative jobs.

There is a business case to be made for hiring more lawyers of diverse backgrounds. More corporate clients these days demand that their legal matters be handled by diverse teams at firms -- and threaten to fire firms that cannot meet the requirement. Big clients like Wal-Mart have recently announced that they will review their outside law firms to ensure that their legal teams are diverse.

Nonetheless, most law firms have not taken large or very public steps to increase their diversity, said Thomas S. Clay, managing director of Altman Weil, a consulting firm that advises law firms.

"It's very unusual," Mr. Clay said of the Mintz Levin move. He added that he thought the approach might work, but said he was not sure if the move would benefit lawyers outside the Washington office. "I have to wonder what that would mean to the corporate diverse lawyer in Chicago or wherever."

Keeping smart, young, minority lawyers with many competing options at one law firm may be difficult. But the lawyers moving to Mintz Levin said the challenge was an important reason they were willing to move. They said they wanted to leave a legacy that would benefit younger lawyers.

"You want to be part of something bigger," Mr. Casellas said. "I said to Ed," he added, referring to Mr. Cooke, "that I would join him at Mintz Levin because I thought we could make history -- and make money."

Photo: New at Mintz Levin: Seated, Gilbert F. Casellas; and, from left, O'Kelly E. McWilliams III, Singleton B. McAllister and Edmund D. Cooke Jr. (Photo by Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times)