

Majority-White Firm Hopes New Scholarship, Hiring Pipeline Changes Its Racial Makeup

by Raychel Lean

When leading Miami trial attorney and professor H.T. Smith was asked about having a scholarship named after him, aimed at supporting law students of color in South Florida, he dropped his phone in disbelief.

“Are you there?” Miami litigator Alan J. Kluger, who posed the question, recalled asking amid the tumbleweed.

After establishing that he was “still here,” Smith accepted, and the H.T. Smith Legal Studies Scholarship was born. Its ultimate mission, according to Kluger, is “to change the base of our lawyer group.”

That’s because Kluger’s firm — Kluger, Kaplan, Silverman, Katzen & Levine — is majority white. And though Kluger said he’s tried to attract more Black attorneys, those efforts have fallen flat.

“We were scratching our heads,” Kluger said. “Miami’s



Prominent Miami trial attorney and Florida International University law professor H.T. Smith, left, and Kluger, Kaplan, Silverman, Katzen & Levine shareholder Alan Kluger have teamed up to launch the scholarship.

a little behind the times compared to other cities.”

Many Black law students are rejecting offers from Miami firms and leaving for places such as Atlanta, New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Houston, according to Smith, who’s founding director of Florida International University College of Law’s Trial Advocacy Program. He was also Miami’s first Black

assistant public defender and assistant county attorney.

“They’re going to all these other places because they don’t feel they have a future here, either professionally or personally, in Miami,” Smith said. “What informed individuals and businesses understand is that this issue of diversity and racial justice is not going to fix itself. We need people of goodwill who,

with intention and purpose, are trying to help to solve this problem.”

So, Kluger enlisted Smith’s help in structuring a new kind of hiring initiative, figuring, “The only way you’re going to change the dynamic is to get more firms to do really activist things to increase the minorities in their firms, so that people begin to view Miami as a safe choice for minorities to live, stay and grow.”

Every year, the recipient will get \$10,000 toward attending eligible Florida law schools, and be considered for a summer clerkship at Kluger Kaplan and a possible attorney position after graduating. The eligible universities are: the University of Miami, Florida International University, Nova Southeastern University, St. Thomas University, Florida State University and the University of Florida.

Kluger said the firm will give preference to second-year law students from traditionally underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups, and to those who are actively involved in community work.

While the initiative doesn’t solve the South Florida legal profession’s diversity problem, Smith called it “a potentially transformative step in giving Black law students hope that

there’s a future for them, and opportunity.”

It’s important that firms are reflective of society, Smith said, because crucial perspectives are missing when decision-makers come from the same racial, ethnic, gender and social backgrounds.

“When I first became a lawyer, I noticed that police departments had almost no women. So, a group of guys tried to figure it out,” Smith said. “Finally, I had enough sense to ask a woman, and she said, ‘Look at the requirements for applicants. The city of Miami requires that you must be 5 feet 8 inches tall. That eliminates most of the women.’ Honest to God, even if I had looked at it and seen it, it would not have registered.”

What’s more, corporate clients nationwide are increasingly seeking out law firms with more diverse groups of attorneys.

Smith said the scholarship addresses three key things that, in his experience, Black law students need most right now: financial aid, mentoring and a sense of belonging.

And while some law students might feel uncertain about being the first Black attorney at their firms, Smith said firm leaders can and should be creating the kind of atmosphere

that makes them feel they belong and are supported.

The hope, Kluger and Smith said, is that other firms will follow suit.

“We want people to copy it. We want people, however they envision it, to understand that this is a really good move,” Kluger said. “Everybody understands that this is a necessity. From top to bottom, they just don’t know what to do.”

Kluger Kaplan, with roughly 30 attorneys, according to its website, focuses on complex litigation in areas such as commercial, bankruptcy, real estate, intellectual property, securities and financial fraud, entertainment, fashion and appellate law. The firm has served as lead counsel in multidistrict litigation across the country.

Applicants for the scholarship are urged to submit their resume, school transcript and a 500-word personal statement explaining who they are and why they’re applying to info@klugerkaplan.com with the subject line: “H.T. Smith Legal Studies Scholarship.” Finalists will be invited for an interview at the firm. This year’s deadline is June 1.

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