

DAILY BUSINESS REVIEW

How Small, Midsize Firms Can Expand Diversity and Inclusion Efforts

In Miami, very good Black lawyers are turning down offers from Miami firms and leaving the state because they do not feel they have opportunities to reach their full potential here.

By Alan Kluger and H.T. Smith

In 2021, we came together to launch the H.T. Smith Legal Studies Scholarship in an effort to support minority law school students. Our goal was not only to improve diversity retention and inclusion within Kluger, Kaplan, Silverman, Katzen & Levine, but also encourage other firms to take tangible steps to create a more diverse workforce in the South Florida legal industry.

Black attorneys still experience slow growth in the legal industry, with the number of Black partners increasing by only half a percentage point since 2009, according to the 2021 National Association of Law Placement (NALP) Report on U.S. Diversity in Law Firms.

In Miami, very good Black lawyers are turning down offers from Miami firms and leaving the state because they

do not feel they have opportunities to reach their full potential here. Many talented individuals are going to places like Atlanta, New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C. and Houston. That's why we decided to do something to improve minority retention in our hometown.

- **Small and midsize firms make up the majority of the South Florida legal community.**

While we are incredibly proud of our firm's scholarship initiative and have seen other major law firms in South Florida launch their own initiatives to improve access and inclusion, it is small and midsize firms that make up a majority of the legal industry here.

For the South Florida legal profession to make a measurable improvement in diversity, access, and inclusion, small and midsize law firms will need to undertake active and



Courtesy photos

Alan Kluger of Kluger, Kaplan, Silverman, Katzen & Levine, left, and H.T. Smith, founding director of the trial advocacy program at Florida International University College of Law, right.

meaningful participation in these types of programs. It is the cumulative results that will have the greatest impact on increasing diversity in the South Florida legal profession.

- **Money, mentorship and the mindset of belonging matters.**

Small and midsize firms can build programs of their own either by offering scholarships, mentorship programs and networking opportunities. The

financial support can be important, but it is not the only way that local firms can begin to support minority students. We have also learned that talent and accomplishments are not sufficient in an environment where people are not intentionally providing equal opportunities for everybody. The things new Black law students need are money, mentoring and the mindset that they belong:

- **Couple the money (scholarships) with mentoring:**

With regards to needs, you can give a scholarship, but law students are yearning for mentorship. Black students who were at the top of their law school class sometimes feel like a “fish out of water” because it hasn’t been their life experience and entering the legal profession can be very daunting. A good mentor can vet ideas, provide advice and make relevant introductions to new attorneys as they find their way in the profession. If you look at any successful person, they had some kind of mentor who helped them advance.

- **Allow students to observe attorneys in action:**

Creating opportunities for law students to observe live events such as meetings, depositions, and court appearances provides them with insight into how the skills taught in law school transfer into real life words and actions. Pairing scholar-

ship dollars with a mentor and opportunities to observe can make a significant difference in a young lawyer’s career trajectory. And like anybody else, you have to earn it. If you get an internship, it gives you the opportunity to prove your work.

- **Advance their professional network:** Networking is also a critical piece of the legal profession that is often left out of the basic law school curriculum. Building strong business relationships and providing access to key decision makers creates opportunities for new attorneys that are crucial to their success.

- **Get the word out:** Coordinate with law schools in your area to “spread the word” about the program.

Publicize the initiative—especially in legal periodicals—to reach qualified candidates and to encourage other firms to establish their own initiatives.

Through the H.T. Smith Legal Studies Scholarship, we have been able to offer the other components in addition to financial support. Last year, Kluger Kaplan awarded Briana Harris, a second-year student at Florida International University College of Law, with the scholarship for the 2021-2022 academic year, and we are excited to welcome her as a summer associate soon.

Since launching the scholarship, we have also seen other

South Florida law firms joining the effort to improve diversity in various ways, including funding scholarships and mentorship programs, like the Koyzak Minority Mentoring Foundation—and that shows us success. As more is written about these types of diversity programs, our goal is to encourage more small and mid-size law firms in South Florida to create their own initiatives to bring visible changes to the makeup of our legal community.

For more information on how to apply for Kluger Kaplan’s H.T. Smith Legal Studies Scholarship, visit their website. The deadline to submit for the 2022-2023 academic year is June 1.

Alan Kluger is a founding member and shareholder of Kluger, Kaplan, Silverman, Katzen & Levine. He is a veteran courtroom lawyer specializing in complex commercial litigation and high-profile matrimonial cases.

H.T. Smith is the founding director of the trial advocacy program at Florida International University College of Law. He was Miami’s first African American assistant public defender and first African American assistant county attorney. His entry into private practice marked the launch of Miami’s first Black-owned law firm practicing in downtown Miami.