

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Minority Attorneys Face It All, Longtime Advocate Says

By Melody Finnemore



Tom Kranovich is a longtime advocate for diversity and inclusion within the profession who has mentored and collaborated with several minority attorneys over the years. As the manager of an in-house insurance defense office, part

of his work included the hiring and development of young lawyers. Kranovich has been involved in the bar's diversity initiatives for more than 10 years. And he routinely takes minority law students and lawyers to local bar functions and sponsors them at bar events.

He has been a formal and informal mentor for minority law students and lawyers, often serving as a resource on interviewing and finding jobs. He defines formal mentorship as a bilateral experience where a law student or new lawyer associates with an experienced attorney to promote and further his or her legal skills and enhance and expedite his or her acceptance into the legal community. Informal mentorship involves a unilateral experience where the law student or new lawyer finds someone that he or she respects and will try to emulate.

"I know that in my own career I had one formal mentor, the Hon. Dale Jacobs, but I had several informal mentors that I watched closely for years and from whom I learned a great deal. I am now passing along what they taught me," says Kranovich, adding that both types of mentorship are important for all lawyers and especially for minority law students and lawyers.

"Formal mentorship brings with it the opportunity to walk with them as they begin their journey through a legal culture comprised of majority lawyers, a culture that otherwise might seem very foreign and foreboding," he says.

Kranovich, who is president-elect of the OSB Board of Governors, notes, "One of the most important initiatives of the bar's diversity and inclusion program is the building of community. Recruitment of minority law students and retention of minority lawyers is a lot easier to accomplish if you have a community to offer."

The experiences taught him much as he mentored African-American, Native American, Asian and Hispanic lawyers. The Hispanic attorney, Angela Lucero, first joined the Kranovich's Lake Oswego firm as an intern, then as a contract lawyer and ultimately as a partner. A native Spanish speaker, Lucero not only brought diversity to the firm but also created a niche that benefits its business model, he says.

Some of the lessons Kranovich has learned along the way have not been so pleasant, however.

"I now see forms of subtle racism that I might otherwise have been oblivious to," says Kranovich, who is Caucasian. "Years ago I went into a major department store with a young minority lawyer that I had just hired. We wanted to check on different items so we split up at the entrance. As soon as we split up, I noticed that my employee was being followed and closely watched by the store's staff. We were professionally dressed and, other than the color of our skin, were essentially indistinguishable. Yet he was tailed and I was not."

Kranovich says it is not unusual to go into a restaurant with a minority lawyer and, regardless of how many are in the party or where the minority lawyer sits within the group, he or she will be served last. He recalls being dumbfounded during a luncheon he and Lucero had with a major client who referred to the county seat of Washington County as "Hills burrito."

The opportunity to work with minority lawyers has changed his outlook in other ways as well. Kranovich, who serves on several committees, says he makes a point of ensuring that his fellow appointees are chosen from a diverse pool of candidates.

"My association with minority lawyers and the champions of diversity within the Oregon State Bar has helped me realize that diversity is more than tearing down barriers against race, ethnicity or gender," he says. "Diversity is a matter of inclusion and it is accomplished by the elimination of unilateral and arbitrary exclusion. Working with minority lawyers and members of the minority community has made me a better person." ■