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Pearls of Wisdom for New Latina Attorneys

Looking For Latina Lawyers Hispanic National Bar Association launches commission to examine status of Latina lawyers

Despite the fact that the Latino population is growing steadily in the United States, the number of Latinos represented in the legal profession is minuscule. The number of Latinas in the legal profession is even smaller. An American Bar Association (ABA) report, "Visible Invisibility," found that minority women lawyers must contend with pressure to disprove preconceived notions, exclusion and lack of mentoring, among other challenges.

Ramona E. Romero, Hispanic National Bar Association (HNBA) president, established the Presidential Commission on the Status of Latinas in the Legal Profession at the beginning of her term in September 2008.

The commission will research the position of Hispanic women working in law professions including their numbers, places where they work and attributes of successful Latina lawyers. The findings will appear in a report along with information regarding the common barriers to advancement. The report will also include recommended solutions to these challenges and strategic action plans to support Latina lawyers. HNBA will host a press conference about the release of the report in July 2009 and will present the report at its September 2009 national convention in Albuquerque, N.M.

History in the Making

The commission will produce the first national study of Latinas in the legal profession and provide solutions to address the severe underrepresentation of Latinas in the legal arena.

In 2007, Diversity & the Bar reported that there were only two Latinas serving as general counsel of Fortune 1000 companies.

What's more, a 2008 National Association of Law Placement (NALP) report found that Hispanic women make up only 0.4 percent of partners at major law firms and 1.8 percent of associates at these firms.

"The status of Latinas in law professions is a vital issue from our perspective," Romero says. "The statistics reported by the NALP are alarming. They have to change."

Melinda Molina, a research professor at St. John's University School of Law, along with Jill Cruz, a Ph. D. candidate, are leading the commission's study.



HNBA President, Ramona E. Romero



Mayda Prego

"There hasn't been much focus on Latinos or Latinas pursuing the legal field." Molina says. "There were two California-based studies done — one on Stanford grads and one on Latino lawyers in Los Angeles — but no scholarship on Latina lawyers on a national level."

An Elevated Vision

The foundation for the commission was built on HNBA's Women in Law Committee. Victor Marquez, HNBA's immediate past president, and Mayda Prego, former national vice-president of committees, implemented the committee as a forum for Latina lawyers.

"Victor and I both recruited talented Latina lawyers who had once been active in the HNBA," says Prego, senior counsel for Chevron Products Company and also the first woman president of the Hispanic National Bar Foundation.

"We were thrilled to learn President Ramona Romero had a plan to elevate the Women in Law Committee to what is now the Presidential Commission on the Status of Latinas in the Legal



Liz Lopez.



Clarissa Cerda

Romero appointed two strong attorneys as co-chairs of the commission: Dolores Atencio, the second female president of the HNBA and General Counsel for the Cesar Chavez School Network, Garcia Calderón Ruiz, LLP; and Clarissa Cerda, former White House lawyer and General Counsel Secretary of LifeLock, Inc and a member of the Minority Corporate Counsel Association Board of Directors.

The commission's 15 commissioners include all five past women presidents of the HNBA: Mari Carmen Aponte (1983-84); Dolores Atencio (1991-1992); Mary Hernandez (1994-1995); Lillian Apodaca (1998-1999) and Alice Velasquez (1999-2000). Atencio is a former commissioner of the ABA Commission on Women and was chair of the ABA Commission's Minority Women's Lawyers Network (MWAN). "We commissioned an abbreviated study on women of color when I was the MWAN chair and found that women of color lawyers got a double whammy: hit or discriminated against on the basis of their gender and race," she says. "In fact, the MWAN Report was entitled, 'The Burdens of Both; the Privileges of Neither' which conveyed our reality."

An Ambitious Project

The commission will conduct research through surveys and focus groups in Phoenix, Los Angeles/San Francisco; Denver, Albuquerque, N.M.; Washington D.C.; Miami, San Antonio, Pennsylvania /Delaware and New York/New Jersey.

In addition to the report, the commission is moving ahead with plans to establish a national award recognizing pioneer Latina lawyers who have made outstanding contributions to the Latino community. The commission will host a contest for emerging Latina artists to create a unique design for the award. The first awards will be presented at the 2009 convention. The award may be named after the first Latina lawyer licensed in the U.S. The commission is conducting research to determine this first Latina lawyer. Its current research goes back to 1938. The commission also plans to host a mid-year panel on Latina lawyers in Miami. Lawyers who wish to support the efforts of the commission, interested in participating in the focus groups or survey process are encouraged to become members of the HNBA.

By Ashley Cisneros



Dolores Atencio

Profession."

Romero, Corporate Counsel, Logistics and Energy at DuPont, began developing the idea of the commission in late 2007. In February 2008, she started to discuss ideas on programs targeting Latinas with HNBA sponsors. Romero is the first female HNBA president in almost 10 years and only the sixth female president in HNBA's history.

"When we call for lawyers to answer our survey, we need them to participate in order to enable the research," Romero says. "We also need financial support. And we encourage those who are in the position to do so, to make it a point to consider Latina lawyers when placing work."

Liz Lopez, national vice president external affairs of HNBA and associate with Davis Wright Tremaine LLP, says that women in the HNBA were excited to see Romero become president.

"What Ramona has achieved being an in-house attorney is amazing," Lopez says. "Having powerful, successful Latina leaders in the HNBA and in the commission is fabulous."

[This article has been edited for www.latinastyle.com. For the full version, check out the January/February issue of *LATINA Style*.]

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