

Diversity Award Named for Past DRI President

DRI has long touted its “commitment to diversity,” and over the years the organization has taken such strides that it is now widely recognized for its accomplishments in the area. DRI’s diversity-related successes can be traced in large part to one person: past president Sheryl J. Willert. So, at a luncheon held June 11, 2009, in Chicago, in conjunction with DRI’s annual Diversity for Success Seminar, DRI President Marc E. Williams announced that the annual diversity award, which DRI presents to an individual attorney in recognition of his or her demonstrated commitment to diversity in the legal profession, will be forever known as the Sheryl J. Willert Pioneer Diversity Award.

Recalling her influence as she climbed the leadership ranks within DRI, Mr. Williams said, “Sheryl was determined to advance in the organization and change it from within. She instilled diversity goals throughout DRI. Working within DRI, she has long pressed for significant change both within the organization and throughout the profession. It’s an understatement, but no member of DRI has done more to advance such a broad range of diversity-related objectives.”

The naming of the award was kept secret from Ms. Willert, and she was surprised and touched by the honor. “DRI has made a tremendous move as an organization. I am so proud of DRI’s achievements,” Ms. Willert said. “I am thankful for both this wonderful recognition and for the support of my colleagues at DRI over the years. Diversity initiatives must be collective efforts if they are to achieve the kind of success that we have achieved.”

Ms. Willert is managing director and a member in the Seattle office of Williams Kastner PLLC. A long time leader in DRI, she served the organization as president from 2002–2003, and was the first woman and lawyer of color to do so.



Sheryl J. Willert and Marc E. Williams.

Raymond M. Williams, a partner with DLA Piper in Philadelphia and chair of DRI’s Diversity Committee, then presented the first Sheryl J. Willert Pioneer Diversity



Diversity Committee Chair Raymond M. Williams (left) presents the Sheryl J. Willert Pioneer Diversity Award to Victor P. Henderson.

Award to Victor P. Henderson. “‘Victor is there for you. Victor is a helper,’ are words that I heard repeatedly,” said Mr. Williams. “[He has] helped countless women and minority attorneys in Chicago.” In accepting the award, Mr. Henderson, who just earlier this year was appointed executive partner of the Chicago office of Holland & Knight LLP, mentioned how fortunate he was to have had so many supportive people in his life. Then, as he recalled the inspiration he has always been able to draw from baseball great Jackie Robinson’s life, he noted that he has also taken the time to reflect on the Branch Rickey side of the story. Branch Rickey was the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers whose determination to desegregate Major League Baseball led to Robinson’s chance to play in the big leagues in 1947. Mr. Henderson noted the courage that Rickey needed to have in order to make a decision that he knew would be greeted with great derision by his peers.

And for minorities, Henderson reminded luncheon attendees, it’s about wanting that chance. “A chance to get up to the plate and hit,” he analogized. “Just like anyone else, it’s understood that if you do get up to the plate and strikeout, your opportunity to play will decrease or disappear—but it’s about getting the chance. It’s also about talent and timing. Never doubt that you have the talent. The timing’s in God’s hands, and all you can do is be ready so when you do get a chance to step to the plate, you get a hit.”

Ray Williams next presented checks to the winners of this year’s DRI Diversity Law School Scholarship. Sau Chun Chan of the University of Richmond School of Law (Class of 2011) and Siana McLean of SUNY Buffalo Law School (Class of 2010) were each awarded \$10,000 for best meeting the scholarship’s criteria of academic excellence, service to the profession, service to the community, and service to the cause of diversity.

Finally, Marc Williams recognized the officers of DRI for their support of the Diversity for Success Seminar. Mr. Williams said that even though the numbers were down from last year's record attendance, the turnout for this year's event was probably even more impressive given the economic challenges that firms are facing. He also offered special thanks to Program Chair J.C. Roper and Program Vice Chair Durga Bharam for their contributions to the seminar's success.



Mr. Williams with diversity scholarship recipient Sau Chun Chan.



Mr. Williams with diversity scholarship recipient Siana McLean.