

LAWYERS CONNECTING BEYOND THE LAW (LCBL)

Enhancing the cohesion, character and inclusiveness of our local legal profession



By Michael W. Hawkins and Judge Karen L. Litkovitz

Lawyers Connecting Beyond the Law (LCBL), formerly known as Lawyer to Lawyer, concluded its 2020-2021 session in July with a group discussion on the events and challenges of the past year, what we learned as individuals, and a path forward.

An enriching and culturally responsive program, LCBL brings together local lawyers and law students of diverse backgrounds for one year, primarily in small learning groups. LCBL seeks to:

- Make our local bar and community more welcoming and inclusive through the development of personal relationships;
- Create new and expanded opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue; and
- Break down barriers and foster inclusiveness by building cultural competencies.

This year, participants engaged in virtual small group sessions and casual get-togethers to share new and diverse experiences. Over 50 lawyers and law students read and discussed resources on racial justice and LGBTQIA+ issues.

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Sessions 1 and 2: Understanding Institutional Racism

In our first session, participants read and discussed “My White Friend Asked Me on Facebook to Explain White Privilege. I Decided to Be Honest,” an article by Lori Lakin Hutcherson, which recounts the impact of institutional racism on the author’s life. The frank firsthand account of instances of institutional racism was eye-opening and thought-provoking.

Participants also discussed “The Hill We Climb,” the spoken word poem recited by the first-ever National Youth Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman, at the 2021 presidential inauguration. Gorman wrote eloquently about hope, reconciliation, and the responsibility to “forge a union with purpose” for all Americans.

Session 3: Exploring Equity and Inclusivity

In our May session, LCBL members discussed the LGBTQIA+ community and how we, as a legal profession, can become more inclusive, supportive, and welcoming.

With help from the University of Cincinnati’s LGBTQ Center, utilizing its written materials used on campus, LCBL participants learned core vocabulary (e.g., what it means to be non-binary or an ally), recommended DOs and DON’Ts (using the word “gay” instead of “homosexual”), and how to be supportive if someone comes out as gay. “Welcome, everyone,” for example, is friendlier than saying, “Welcome, ladies and gentlemen.”

We considered a report from the Center for American Progress titled “The State of the LGBTQ Community in 2020, a

National Public Opinion Study”. That report explained how more than one in three LGBTQ Americans in 2020 faced mistreatment in their public, work, and personal lives, and how discrimination adversely affected the mental and economic well-being of many gay Americans. Access to health care was also a problem faced by many members of the community.

LCBL participants heard from four dynamic speakers on their experiences and the efforts they are making to encourage equity and inclusivity: a partner from a large firm’s Louisville office who came out mid-way through his career and now leads an affinity group for the firm’s personnel (gay and straight); a transgender associate attorney from Dayton who transitioned during law school; a local gay attorney involved in many groups at the CBA; and a rising third-year student at UC’s College of Law where she helps lead an LGBTQIA+ group.

Session 4: Advocating for Change — Beyond the Law

At the final LCBL meeting, Kate Christoff, UC College of Law Recruiting and Analytics Manager, spoke about a path forward.

“Self-reflection is a key step in how you move forward,” Christoff said. “We need to ask ourselves, ‘What have I learned? What do I need to learn more about?’”

She encouraged participants to take advantage of available resources that challenge their way of thinking, such as CBA articles, listservs, and the ABA’s 21-day Racial Equity and LGBTQ+ Equity Habit-Building Challenges.

Christoff also spoke about being an advocate for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the office. Consider adding preferred pronouns to your signature line; ask people for their pronouns, or include them in your introduction. Be inclusive—reach out to those outside your circle. Finally, don’t ignore offensive jokes or comments.

“It’s important not to be silent when we see and hear hate speech or offensive comments in the office,” said Christoff.

Being a DEI ambassador also means listening and asking questions in a way that keeps meaningful communication open. Consider saying, “Tell me more about ...” and not demanding, “Why would you say that?” Give people the benefit of the doubt and have empathy.

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Share what you’ve learned. A good place to start is with family and friends who do not share your views.

Zamira Saidi, an LLM graduate and third year law student at the University of Cincinnati, said LCBL is about creating positive change. Saidi, who is originally from Afghanistan, said in Afghan culture, silence can be perceived as acceptance. That silence could be because of a lack of options, opportunities, education, knowledge, or understanding that limits one’s ability to discuss a problem.

“Discussing the problem is part of the solution,” Saidi said, and “LCBL is a platform for discussing different issues, finding solutions, and educating ourselves.”

Moving Forward

We’ve had open, frank discussions about diversity in our community throughout this LCBL session; how we can embrace it, thrive together, effect change, and enhance our lives by learning more about one another’s cultures, perspectives, and experiences. Although the pandemic made the past 12 months difficult, the connections we forged “beyond the law” made it a time of enrichment, growth, and new friendships.

Nearly 250 lawyers have participated in this culturally diverse program since 2018. Please join us for our next transformative opportunity. LCBL is open to members of the Cincinnati Bar Association and local law students who aspire to and have the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures.

We look forward to our next season, which begins this fall.

Be on the lookout for an email invitation from the CBA. For more information, please contact our co-chairs: Michael W. Hawkins, 513-977-8270, Michael.hawkins@dinsmore.com and United States Magistrate Judge Karen L. Litkovitz, 513-564-7690, karen_litkovitz@ohsd.uscourts.gov.

Litkovitz is a United States Magistrate Judge and Hawkins is an attorney at Dinsmore & Shohl.

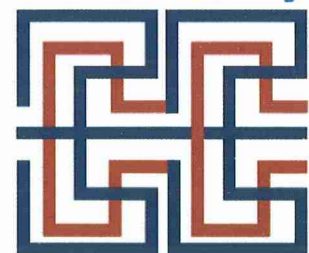
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