

Legal Community Seeks Access, Diversity

By Andy Meek

Diversity and access to justice are some of the watchwords often heard around Memphis legal circles these days.

Diversity, because of the continued concern that both men and women get equal shots at advancing up the ranks from law school all the way to the corner office. Access to justice, because of everything from the recession's grinding toll to the ever-present scars of poverty in Memphis that all combine to make legal problems harder than ever to pay for.

All of it springs from a similar place. Harrison McIver, executive director and CEO of [Memphis Area Legal Services Inc.](#), a nonprofit group that exists to provide legal help to needy Memphians, takes it all the way back to the beginning of the U.S. Constitution.

In the Constitution's preamble, after the declaration is made that "We the people" are gathering to "form a more perfect union," the next purpose that's mentioned is the establishment of justice.

"The first thing it talks about is 'establish justice.' Before anything else," McIver said.

Justice is sought both in the community and on behalf of it. McIver's group is in the midst of a capital campaign to help it better do just that.

Justice, or rather equality, also is something the industry pushes for behind the scenes, to make sure a firm's partners and associates reflect as much as possible the communities they serve.

In September, the law firm of [Jackson Lewis LLP](#), which opened a Memphis office four years ago, achieved a prominent national recognition for its diversity efforts.

The firm, one of the largest workplace law firms in the country, ranked 36th on MultiCultural Law magazine's 2012 "Top 100 Law Firms for Diversity" listing.

Jackson Lewis also earned high rankings in several specialized areas that will be published in the spring edition of MultiCultural Law. Patrick Vaccaro, firm-wide managing partner, said Jackson Lewis' commitment to diversity in its ranks is a core value as the firm continues to expand around the country. Examples of that include the firm's scholarship program, which provides scholarships to students traditionally underrepresented in the legal field.

The firm has many other efforts. As an example, Jackson Lewis also is a founding member of the Project for Attorney Retention, an initiative of The Center for Worklife Law at the University of California Hastings College of the Law. Vaccaro said Jackson Lewis partner Weldon Latham is leading the firm's diversity to a new level.

"Our extremely impressive standings in MultiCultural Law's 'Top 100' lists are a testament to Jackson Lewis' unwavering focus on inclusion efforts," said Latham, chair of the firm's Diversity Committee as well as Jackson Lewis' corporate diversity counseling group.

Meanwhile, there's a similar push at other firms. About one-third of the equity partners at [Ford & Harrison LLP](#), for example, are female.

At its annual Fellows reception Oct. 11, the Memphis Bar Foundation awarded grants totaling \$30,000 to nine nonprofit groups. Among them were Memphis Area Legal Services and the Memphis Bar Association Diversity Committee for the Summer Law Intern Program.

Then there's Butler, Snow, O'Mara, Stevens & Cannada PLC, which interviews at several law schools that have a significant percentage of minority students. It also participates in interviewing at the Tennessee Bar Association Diversity Job Fair and the Southern Region of the National Black Law Students Association Job Fair.

The Memphis-based law firm of Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz PC has been ranked among the top 10 law firms in the nation in [Vault Inc.](#)'s 2013 "Best Law Firms for Diversity."

On the pro bono and access to justice front, Memphis Area Legal Services is raising funds to continue supporting its work. To underscore its importance: about 19,000 people called MALS for help in 2011. The organization also raised a record \$350,000 last year from private donations, but it still had to lay off staff because of congressional budget cuts that offset the additional funding.

George "Buck" Lewis, a shareholder in Baker Donelson's Memphis office, said pro bono work has never been more critical to the Memphis community because of historic levels of poverty in the city, state and country.