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Diversity: The 'D' word – why it means something good for you

10/24/2011

The JBA Human Rights Law Section Co-Chairwoman
Crystal Freed

The JBA Diversity Section chaired by Joe Camerlengo held the second of its diversity symposiums earlier this year. As an outgrowth of that, coupled with his stated goal of increasing diversity, The JBA President Michael Freed decided to highlight the benefits that our legal community has already realized by having unconscious competence in diversity and inclusion.

What does that mean? Basically speaking, it means having our reflex reactions be one that promotes diversity. Of course, when we hear diversity we think, race and gender or non-merit based affirmative action and we cringe or maybe even get angry.

While race and gender are important attributes of diversity, the “D” word also includes those individuals with unique talents, characteristics and challenges.

Our Diversity Spotlight today is on Melina Buncome-Williams.

She is a Capital Crimes Attorney with the Public Defender's Office.

In that position, Buncome-Williams happens to be the first African-American (although technically speaking, Caribbean-American) female in that position. This trailblazer started as a public defender in Broward County; went into private practice but then returned to being a public defender, this time in Jacksonville in 1997.

She moved up the ranks – Juvenile, Repeat Offender, Special Defense (Major Crimes) and finally, Division Chief.

In 2007, though Ms. Buncome-Williams was the most qualified and the most-senior Division Chief, she was not promoted to the position of Capital Crimes Attorney.

That position, however, finally became hers in 2009 when Jacksonville elected Matt Shirk as its Public Defender.

When asked why he promoted Buncome-Williams, Mr. Shirk said simply, “she was the most qualified and is a damn good lawyer.”

He went on to add that “Melina is a bulldog in the courtroom but yet is the first to plan celebrations for office birthday parties.” Notably,

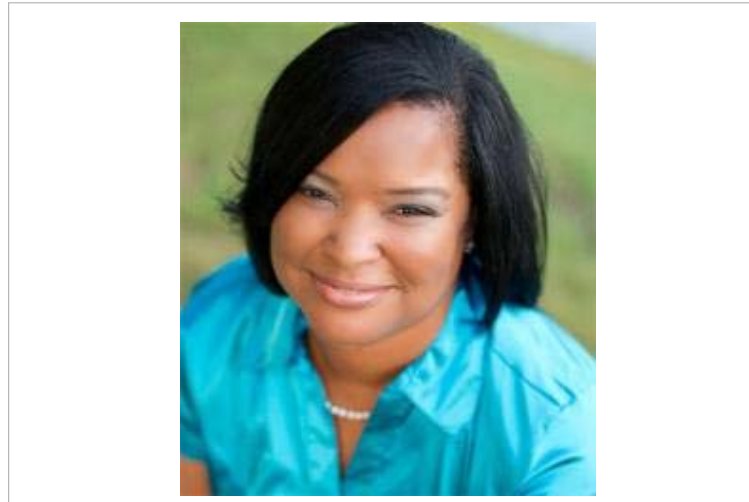
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Buncome-Williams

Melina is excellent at community relations and is passionate about justice teaching, a program that promotes law-related education in the public schools.

You see what adds to her being a “damn good lawyer” is her ability to multitask (a product of being a single mother); her understanding and appreciation of accents and the myriad cultural backgrounds of the clients she serves (a product of being from the Virgin Islands); and her ability to look beneath the surface (a skill learned in her assimilation into the culture of the United States).

Her diversity runs much deeper than the skin and that, in turn, makes the public defender’s office a stronger institution because she is an integral part of it.

I would be remiss if I did not mention that it takes a good leader with experience that transcends race and color to be able to benefit from all-round diversity.

Rather than me simply reporting to you, I challenge you to explore the reasons Matt Shirk was able to exhibit unconscious competence in diversity and inclusion.



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