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Power Player
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Panelists on trials, triumphs as African-American attorneys

Charlotte law school, diversity committee co-sponsor discussion

BY AUSTIN LIGHT

CHARLOTTE — The Charlotte School of Law and the Minority Focus Committee of the North Carolina Bar co-sponsored a panel discussion March 18 on "Diverse Excellence: Unconventional Success with a J.D."

Participants compared notes on the difficulties and achievements of being a

minority in the legal community and shared advice for young professionals.

Moderator Alonzo Alston, committee co-chair and president of Charlotte Law Diversity Alliance, said the event's purpose was showing young attorneys and law students, particularly African-Americans and other minorities, the possibilities that await them.

"Anyone, all persons, should recognize that there are opportunities beyond where they begin," Alston said. "Set your sights high, work hard, manage your relationships well, and proceed as if

every day counts."

Panelists included:

• Fred Whitfield, Charlotte Bobcats president and COO

• Sophia Nelson, editor-in-chief, politicalintersection.com, and CEO/owner of iAsk, Inc., a national organization for professional African-American women

• Adam Aberra, associate general counsel and senior VP of franchise development at Five Guys Enterprises

• Robert Wynn, director of Asset

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Builders, which promotes financial education and wealth-building for low-income families.

• Victoria Carter, associate dean for admissions and financial aid at Charlotte School of Law

• Corie Pauling, senior counsel at TIAA-CREF

• Warren Ballentine, host of the Warren Ballentine Radio Show and frequent guest correspondent on CNN

Several panelists attended the discussion in person, while others participated via Web conferencing.

Alston noted that according to a nationwide survey of large law firms, only 4.4 percent of practicing attorneys are African-American.

"There's a disparity there," he said, adding that African-Americans make up 12 percent of the country's population.

From Whitfield's story of a potential payroll mistake that occurred because of his race, to Pauling's tough journey through law school during the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas controversy, each of the panelists described what it was like to be part of that 4.4 percent.

"Racism is institutionalized," Ballentine said. "You're not going to find someone that's a racist today because it's a system."

"We can be part of the problem, though," Pauling responded. "We sometimes isolate ourselves into social networks full of people that look like us. If the same people you party with are the same people you study with, that's not good."

"You should work to expand your network, include people of all ethnicities," Carter added.

"Reach out, but don't forget where you come from," Ballentine said.

Aberra said his clients are often shocked when they meet him because of his race and his relatively young age.



Radio host Warren Ballentine no longer practices law, but said his law degree has been advantageous in many ways. Panelists Corie Pauling, Victoria Carter, Warren Ballentine and other panelists spoke with some participants via web conferencing.



"We can be part of the problem, though. We sometimes isolate ourselves into social networks full of people that look like us."

CORIE PAULING,
SENIOR COUNSEL, TIAA-CREF

"When people find out that I'm an attorney...they are surprised," Aberra said. "I'm on a number of conference calls each day...and they have no idea what I look like. Once they arrive here at the office, it's usually the same format: They come to my office and ask to speak to Adam Aberra — mind you, I'm behind my desk — and I'll tell them I'm Adam Aberra and there is always a three to five second pause as they process that I'm the

guy they've been talking to on the phone for months."

Pauling observed that while progress has been made, much work remains. Experiences like Aberra's can be used to African-Americans' advantage, she said.

"In Adam's case...it's his opportunity to shine," Pauling said. "It's unfortunate that he is surprising people, but he's doing community service at that point representing all the other young brothers that person is going to encounter from here on out."

Panelists also discussed their experiences of leaving corporate and legal practices in favor of counseling — or becoming — entrepreneurs.

Nelson, who became a political commentator after losing her job in corporate America, said achieving her dream came about as a result of being diligent and pursuing new opportunities.

"It was the right time, the right place, the right opportunity and I took full

advantage of it. I didn't let myself go back to a traditional job where I wasn't happy just because I was making a lot of money," said Nelson, who has appeared on CNN, Fox News and other networks. "I took a huge pay cut when I left, but I'm happy and I'm doing what I love and it's leading to places I could have never imagined."

Though all the panelists have a J.D., several, like Ballentine, Whitfield and Nelson, don't practice law on a regular basis. They encourage law students to look at their degree as something that can create new opportunities.

"A law degree is a sign of credibility," Whitfield said, prompting several others to nod their heads in agreement. "It's not just about being a lawyer; [the degree] opens doors. Be proactive and use it to chase your dream."

Ballentine agreed: "People treat you differently when they know you have a J.D. Use it to your advantage."