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New York

Corporate Mentors Help Visiting South African Lawyers
Develop World-Class Legal Skills

Three talented South Africans, who represent the courage, intensity and determination of their rapidly changing society, spent the past year enrolled in the Association's South African Visiting Lawyers Program. A project of The Cyrus R. Vance Center for International Justice Initiatives, the Visiting Lawyers Program was established three years ago to help in the transformation of the legal profession in the new South Africa.

"We all like to think of New York as the legal capital of the world. But if you are going to be the capital, and you are committed to legal activities and pro bono work and advancing the profession, then you have to think about places where you can contribute," said Evan Davis, former Association President and a member of the Vance Center Committee. "The Vance Center clearly provides an opportunity for the New York bar to leverage its influence for the betterment of the world."

When he was president of the Association, Davis traveled to South Africa in 2001 to assess the feasibility of a program that could help develop the country's legal profession by providing opportunities to attorneys from previously disadvantaged groups. He met with the Law Society of South Africa, the General Bar Council, members of law firms, the National Association of Democratic Lawyers and the Black Lawyers Association. With seed money from the Ford Foundation, the Association's Visiting Lawyers Program was launched.

Mentors Make the Difference

The Visiting Lawyers Program is made possible through the participation of a number of New York City law firms and corporate law departments that offer working fellowships to the visiting attorneys. During the three years that the program has been in existence, the following firms and in-house departments have participated: Citigroup Global Markets, Inc.; Cleary, Gottlieb, Steen & Hamilton; Clifford Chance US LLP; Cravath, Swaine & Moore; Credit Suisse First Boston; Goldman Sachs & Co.; JP Morgan Chase; Kirkland & Ellis; Morgan Stanley; O'Melveny & Myers; Shearman & Sterling; Simpson Thacher & Bartlett; Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom; Sullivan & Cromwell and Weil, Gotshal & Manges.

"The number of visiting attorneys is limited by the number of New York firms willing and able to meet the program's requirements," Betsy Plevan, President of the Association, explained, and said she hopes that number will grow as law firms reach out to in-house legal departments of clients and appeal to their interest in promoting diversity and human rights.

Rigorous Selection Process

Loretta Lynch, a partner at Hogan & Hartson and a former U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of New York, has worked on defining the selection process for the program. To qualify for the Vance Center's program, candidates must first work two years as an attorney past their clerkship.

“This program is going to leave footprints into the future,” Lynch says. “It’s also an intangible gift to a New York lawyer who wants to do public service by mentoring younger attorneys. But best of all, when I travel there and see these serious young people, I see what the country has accomplished in just a generation.”

Three Experiences

The stories of these three South African attorneys — how they overcame great odds in a discriminatory society and then were chosen for the Visiting Lawyers Program — are a testament to the human spirit and intellect. In their still-fresh lives, they all benefited from lucky turns and surprises to get here. Interviewed recently upon the completion of their fellowships, each attorney became very expressive about the professional benefits the Visiting Lawyer Program provided them.

Jabu Thobela, who was at O’Melveny & Myers, said she found a mentor there in “Phil Isom, a black man who is a partner. He taught me that if you work hard and push yourself and are open to learning, commercial law is just like any other field of law.” With her New York credentials, she says, she will return to her firm and “work out a learning path to improve and sharpen my skills as a commercial attorney.” She also plans to use her future opportunities to help children who are orphaned by AIDS.

Ursula Fikelepi worked in the general counsel’s office at Goldman Sachs for half of the year and at Sullivan & Cromwell the other half. “To have exposure to corporate law and finance, and to an area of the global economy that I never knew I’d be interested in, was very affirming. Now I know I can understand this subject.”

Windsor Thekiso worked on global mergers and acquisitions at Citigroup, through a secondment from Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom where he spent most of the year. “I learned a great deal of commercial practice during my time at Skadden, and also had the privilege of working in the legal department at Citigroup. This helped me understand better the needs of the bank and corporate clients in general: how clients negotiate their deals and reach commercial and business decisions. I have come out of this experience with a renewed confidence in my negotiating skills and a better understanding of the conduct of M&A business from a corporate perspective.”