



# PROMOTING DIVERSITY NOW AND IN THE FUTURE THROUGH THE CMBA AFFINITY BARS OF COLORS

BY MARLON A. PRIMES & VALISSA TURNER HOWARD



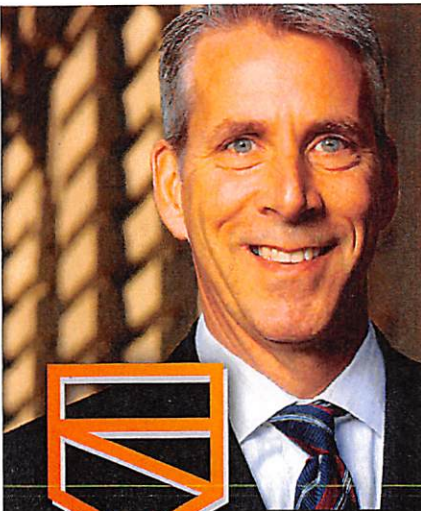
In January 16, 2019, the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association (CMBA) entered into a historic Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with local affinity bars of color to promote inclusion and diversity within our legal community.<sup>1</sup> Under the MOU, the CMBA agreed to provide a mailing address, storage space, and modest administrative support for the South Asian Bar Association of Ohio, the Ohio Hispanic Bar Association, the Asian American Bar Association of Ohio, and the Norman S. Minor Bar Association, which

is the largest organization of African American lawyers and judges in Ohio.<sup>2</sup> Since the affinity bars have connections to local, regional, and national networks of diverse attorneys and law students, far outside the CMBA's footprint, the MOU allows the CMBA to use these channels to enhance existing diversity programs, obtain input and ideas for new programs, promote membership, identify and cultivate a diverse group of future bar leaders, and develop partnerships on a variety of initiatives. During the past year, the MOU has been expanded to include the Arab American Bar Association of Ohio and the Filipino American Lawyers Association of Ohio. The MOU is certainly not a remedy or cure for all inclusion and diversity issues. Understanding our past and present history will, however, help us understand how the continued use of the MOU ensures a brighter and more diverse future for our entire legal community.

66,000 lawyers, judges, legal professionals, and law students.<sup>5</sup> The NBA's Cleveland affiliate, the Norman S. Minor Bar Association, was founded in 1980.<sup>6</sup> Other MOU signatories are able to share similar histories. They, likewise, were founded because their members were not welcomed by majority bar associations that often failed to recognize, acknowledge, and meet their unique needs.

Since the opening of membership to minority attorneys in national, state, and local majority bar associations, research consistently documents the challenges minority attorneys continue to face in the legal profession.<sup>7</sup> In 1993, the Ohio Supreme Court and the Ohio State Bar Association followed the lead of other jurisdictions around the country, creating the Ohio Commission on Racial Fairness. The Commission was chaired by late Ohio Chief Justice Thomas Moyer and now-retired Cleveland Municipal Court Judge Ronald Adrine. The mission of the Commission was to "... identify racial bias where it exists and propose methods for eliminating it from the legal profession and the justice system."<sup>8</sup> One of the Commission's recommendations was to encourage majority bar associations to develop more effective working relationships with minority attorneys, to assist them in becoming "... involved in the informal as well as formal organization and culture of the local and Ohio State Bar Association."<sup>9</sup> According to Judge Adrine, "the CMBA's MOU is exactly what the Commission recommendation envisioned. Since the affinity bar associations in Ohio are relatively small and have limited resources, the assistance of larger and better resourced associations, like the CMBA, is essential to helping them achieve their mission of providing needed support and networking to minority legal communities."

ABA President-Elect Reginald Turner of Detroit, Michigan, who is the son of former Cleveland Safety Director Reginald Turner,



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Sr., also believes the CMBA is on the right track with the MOU. Turner has served as the president of the NBA, the State Bar of Michigan, and the Wolverine Bar Association, which is the largest organization of African American lawyers and judges in Michigan. The support, assistance, and encouragement that Turner received from former ABA President Dennis Archer and other members of majority bars have been instrumental in his success. According to Turner, “supporting affinity bar associations not only provide a pathway for diverse attorneys to move into leadership positions in majority bar associations, but it also enhances diversity efforts to recruit, retain, and promote attorneys of color throughout our entire profession.”

**Addressing the Present Challenges**

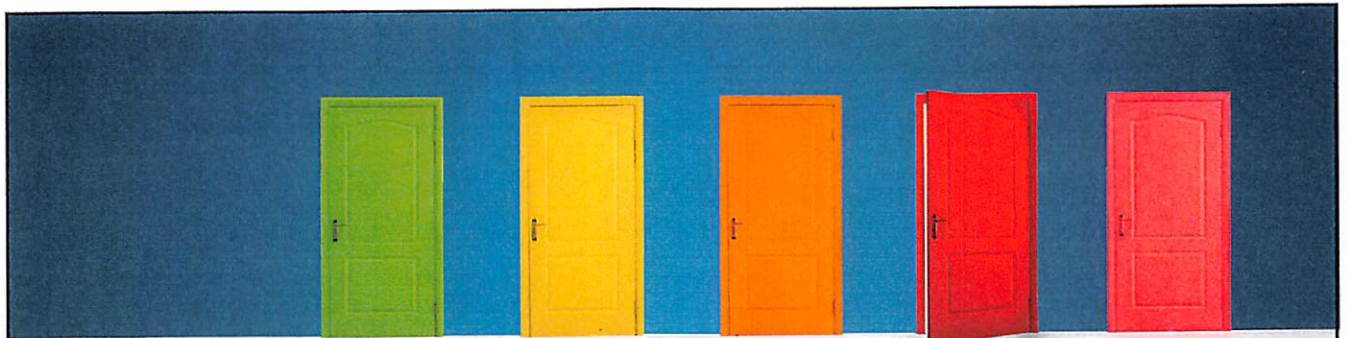
After signing the MOU, the presidents of the designated affinity bars joined the CMBA’s Inclusion and Diversity Committee, forming a subcommittee. The subcommittee meets to coordinate, enhance, and support the CMBA’s diversity programs. They issue joint statements to encourage the CMBA’s lawyers and all eligible

members of the community to participate in the electoral process, particularly elections for local, county, and state court judgeships. The affinity bars also sponsor a variety of social events to help the members of their respective organizations to get to know one another. In so doing, they foster and facilitate cooperation and networking. Since the subcommittee’s formation in 2019, it met with the leadership of the Office of the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio to discuss issues of mutual concern and ways to assist that office’s diversity efforts. Under the leadership of Gabe Kelly, the Vice Chair of the CMBA Inclusion and Diversity Committee and a member of the CMBA Board of Directors, the affinity bars created an online diversity directory. The directory provides a resource to prospective legal employers and prospective clients, who are looking to be more inclusive, by giving them the ability to quickly identify minority attorneys in Northeastern Ohio to assist their efforts to achieve higher levels of success in recruiting, hiring, and retaining a more diverse workforce.

**Preparing for the Future**

In the aftermath of the recent tragic homicides of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and others, legal employers and prospective clients are more sensitive to long-standing racial inequities in American society. They have come to recognize the need to make welcomed adjustments to the way they do business and interact with their employees. These long overdue adjustments are necessary to achieve the goal of attracting, hiring, and retaining attorneys from underrepresented populations. The affinity bars are anxious to assist local legal employers and prospective clients in their quest to expand the number of minority attorneys at entry-level and leadership positions. The growing demand is self-evident.

Along those lines, one sterling example that the CMBA’s affinity bars hope to replicate is the Black GC 2025 initiative. That effort was co-founded several years ago by Eaton Corporation’s Executive Vice President and General Counsel, April Miller Boise, to identify and help move Black lawyers into the general counsel position in Fortune 500 and other



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large companies by the year 2025.<sup>10</sup> According to Boise, “the initiative has an application, interview, and screening process, which focuses on ensuring that prospective Black candidates for general counsel can meet three core criteria: 1) strong executive presence and interpersonal skills; 2) significant technical legal expertise and experience; and 3) demonstration of excellent judgment. The Black GC initiative works with other Black general counsels, search firms, individual executive recruiters, and corporations to identify ‘ready now’ candidates. Since the initiative began, the market has seen an increase in the number of Black general counsels in Fortune 500 and 1000 companies. The initiative tracks GC changes, open roles, and active searches, and it works with a cohort of senior Black lawyers who are ‘ready now’ to move into the C-suite and quickly fill general counsel vacancies when they arise.”

The 2021 CMBA Affinity Bars of Color Summit will explore how to potentially replicate aspects of this initiative and creatively adopt other steps to enhance diversity in our local legal community. This much-needed event will bring together and help affinity bar leaders,

future leaders, and veteran bar leaders provide advice and share their experiences. Participants will learn about topics such as: “Identifying and Recruiting Future Affinity Bar Leaders,” “Affinity Bar Leader Best Practices,” and “Self-Care for the Affinity Bar Leader.” The virtual Summit is scheduled for April 15, 2021, and the CMBA will offer 3 CLE credit hours for the event. Register on the CMBA website.

The CMBA Affinity Bars of Color, the CMBA, and its Inclusion and Diversity Committee are optimistic about the future. They are also ready, willing, and able to provide support for attorneys from underrepresented populations through the MOU and to continue to help public and private employers meet their diversity goals. If you are interested in helping the affinity bars and the CMBA Inclusion and Diversity Committee achieve these objectives, please contact Jessica Paine at the CMBA at (216) 539-5982 or [jpaine@clemetrobar.org](mailto:jpaine@clemetrobar.org).

<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Nobile, Crain’s Cleveland Business, Minority, Cleveland bar association band together to address diversity, January 20, 2019, <https://www.crainscleveland.com/legal/minority-cleveland-bar-associations-band-together-address-diversity>.

<sup>2</sup> (Id.).

<sup>3</sup> Howard Kaplan and Tiffany Wiley, American Bar Association Timeline at pg. 1, American Bar Association, [https://www.americanbar.org/about\\_the\\_aba/timeline](https://www.americanbar.org/about_the_aba/timeline)

<sup>4</sup> Id.

<sup>5</sup> National Bar Association Website, National Bar Association History at pg. 1, [nationalbar.org](http://nationalbar.org).

<sup>6</sup> Norman S. Minor Bar Association Website, Norman S. Minor Bar Association History at pg. 1, [www.nsmba.org](http://www.nsmba.org).

<sup>7</sup> Allison E. Laffey, American Bar Association, Diversity and Inclusion in Law: Challenges and Initiatives, May 2, 2018, <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/litigation/committees/jiop/articles/2018/diversity-and-inclusion-in-the-law-challenges-and-initiatives/>.

<sup>8</sup> Ohio Chief Justice Thomas Moyer and Retired Cleveland Municipal Court Judge Ronald Adrine, Report of Ohio Racial Fairness Commission at pg. 1, [www.supremecourt.ohio.gov](http://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov).

<sup>9</sup> (Id.).

<sup>10</sup> Black General Counsel 2025 Initiative, Overview at pg. 1, [www.blackgc2025.com](http://www.blackgc2025.com).



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**Barbara Lum**  
Partner, Litigation Practice Group



**Juan Morado, Jr.**  
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