

MBA Seeks More Applicants For Leadership Forum

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REBEKAH HEARN | The Daily News

The Memphis Bar Association's Leadership Forum, which began in 2004, offers attorneys in their third to eighth year of practice opportunities to network, meet nationally known legal icons and create projects to serve the community.

The deadline for applications for the 2009-2010 year was Friday, but MBA Executive Director Anne Fritz said the bar received 14 applications by that date. The class is made for a group of 25, so the MBA will be accepting applications until Aug. 31.

"That's the ultimate deadline," Fritz said.

Participation covers 25 hours of continuing legal education credit, and tuition is \$550. The forum kicks off Sept. 18 with a retreat at the Lichterman Nature Center.

Past participants include Lang Wiseman and Van Turner, chairs of the local Republican and Democratic parties, respectively; Judge Camille McMullen, the first black woman to serve on a Tennessee appellate court; Paul Morris of Martin Tate Morrow & Marston PC, who currently chairs the board of directors at Memphis Area Legal Services Inc.; and Assistant District Attorney General Chris Lareau.

The program is constantly evolving, and the bar works with a local consultant who helps with the selection process, curriculum and event planning.

Origins

Kathy Story of Story Consulting is the educational consultant for the Leadership Forum. She said Fritz, a longtime friend, contacted her because Story had helped develop a curriculum for a leadership institute for judges and court professionals at the University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law.

"Anne's been very involved ... in the National Association of Bar Executives, and several bar associations were starting leadership programs for their relatively new attorneys," Story said.

The year Susan Clark was MBA president (2004-2005), she heard about similar programs at an American Bar Association meeting.

"It just happened that both of us had the interest," Fritz said. "She was the one who suggested we bring in Kathy, which was a great idea. Kathy really helped us design it and I think made it what it is today."

Story is on the forum's steering committee, which until this year was chaired by federal Magistrate Judge Diane Vescovo. She had to bow out this year because of other commitments. Fritz currently is seeking a new chair for the steering committee, which has eight to 10 members.

“Basically, the steering committee, we try to get one or two people who have served on the faculty ... and we do try to get at least one graduate of each of the classes to serve on it,” Fritz said.

“We try to use graduates ... because they’ve been through it and they probably know best what things need to be tweaked, what works, what doesn’t and how we can improve things. And that’s something we really do try to do.”

Ensuring diversity among participants also benefits the lawyers and the people they serve with their projects and public appearances.

“Diversity actually is one of the main guiding values of this,” Story said.

The steering committee selects a variety of attorneys, not only in terms of race and gender, but also sexual orientation, religion and economic status as well as practice areas, firm size and law schools attended.

Although applications are open to everybody, people or organizations can suggest or nominate someone they think would enjoy the program. Fritz said for the past few years, the Association of Women Attorneys has sponsored a young female lawyer to attend the forum, even paying her tuition.

A year in the life

From acceptance, the emerging leaders stay busy. At the retreat, attorneys are divided into small groups, each assigned a mentor. The MBA also encourages mentors to serve on the steering committee.

The groups then begin monthly programs at various locations around Memphis, such as the National Civil Rights Museum, Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association (MIFA), BRIDGES Inc. and St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital. The programs vary from presentations to facility tours.

“Sometimes, it’s interactive workshops,” Story said. “At the National Civil Rights Museum, they actually listened to Mike Cody tell his story and his involvement as an attorney during (the civil rights era), and last year Rev. Billy Kyles joined him, and they toured the museum.”

Lareau said this particular monthly program made a strong impression on him.

“Without a doubt, the personalized tour of the National Civil Rights Museum ... was the highlight of the monthly outings,” he said. “It was incredible to hear these two gentlemen discuss their firsthand accounts of the events surrounding the assassination of (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.).

“Most people don’t get an opportunity to hear about the legal battles being fought in federal court just hours before Dr. King was murdered.”

Serving the community – and themselves

Each group must develop and implement a community service project by graduation.

“One group put together a handbook about the courts for use by attorneys and lay people,” Story said.

Another group created a disaster plan for the MBA in the event of an earthquake or similar catastrophe, which had not previously existed.

Leadership Forum groups have spoken to senior citizens about topics that affect them, gone to high schools and even elementary schools to speak about the legal profession. One of the groups judged the Memphis Urban Debate League City Championship Tournament in February, Fritz said. The group members also talked to the debate league students about law in general. Lareau’s project involved making legal resource brochures for Memphis Area Legal Services.

“Each team member devoted approximately 30 hours to conducting legal research and writing summaries of law for MALS clients,” Lareau said. His topic was unemployment compensation.

By the annual May graduation, attorneys have formed partnerships or friendships where otherwise none would exist.

Lareau is one attorney who especially benefited from the networking.

“Because I am a prosecutor, I have very little opportunity to network with my colleagues in the civil bar, so the forum created several new relationships for me,” Lareau said.

Working more closely with colleagues also has other benefits.

“We also think that fosters professionalism in the bar,” Fritz said. “Once you get to know somebody, it’s harder to treat them unprofessionally.”

Overall, past participants, bar members and Story seem to have positive – although always open-minded – views of the Leadership Forum, while keeping the program dynamic and open to changes.

“Seeing other young lawyers with a heart to serve the city was inspiring, and that was probably the most beneficial aspect of the forum,” Lareau said.