



State Bar of Texas President Trey Apffel, left, and President-elect Allan K. DuBois, right, were present to congratulate former board chair Kim J. Askew, center, on winning a 2015 Spirit of Excellence Award at the American Bar Association's 2015 Midyear Meeting in Houston.

The Spirit of Excellence

Each year, the American Bar Association honors the work of lawyers who promote a more diverse profession. This year, that spotlight shone on Dallas attorney Kim J. Askew, a former State Bar of Texas board chair and longtime leader at the local, state, and national bar levels. Askew, a partner in K&L Gates, received one of four 2015 Spirit of Excellence Awards from the ABA Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession during an awards luncheon Feb. 7 at the ABA Midyear Meeting in Houston. Her acceptance speech has been edited, condensed, and reprinted below.

I STAND IN AWE BEFORE YOU TODAY AS I RECEIVE THIS AWARD HONORING DIVERSITY IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION—an award that did not exist when I entered the practice of law. This has taken me back to the time when I was a little girl growing up in the civil rights South. Savannah, Georgia, was a place of tumult and change in the late '60s when I started to think that I might become a lawyer.

I did not know what the civil rights movement was; I had read enough *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines to know about

Martin Luther King Jr. and that the South was changing, but it was sitting in churches and community centers when lawyers talked about rights that helped bring these issues into focus for me. When your mother could not afford a babysitter, you went where your mother went. She did organizing work while her children were on the back pews doing homework or playing. And I was listening. I heard the voices of the lawyers. I held their voices over the voices of the ministers in the room because they did not just talk about hope and redemption but also about

rights and voting. They seemed to understand the significance of what was happening in a world that was rapidly changing. People looked to them for guidance and a sense of direction. To a little girl, they seemed fearless.

I now know that those lawyers were talking about the Voting Rights Act and many of the laws that came into being that truly changed the lives of minorities in this country. As a girl, I knew that people were starting to vote and that we didn't have to go into certain doors anymore. Today, I marvel at the work that I do—enforcing some of those very laws and knowing that I practice in the very federal circuit from which so much of the caselaw came.

My story is the story of so many people in this country. A dream is instilled and it is achieved through hard work and a commitment to achieving a goal. Like others in this room, I had many “firsts”—not because we set out to be first but because we were there and we knew we had to open the doors for ourselves and for others.

When I became the first African-American law clerk in the Northern District of Texas, I was honored to clerk for my judge, but I also thought I was ably qualified and frankly could not imagine why a judge would not hire me. When I walked through the doors of my firm, another first for a lawyer of color, I knew there would be challenges, but I needed a job and this seemed like a really good one. You learned that working hard and smart really did matter and that our very presence in the hallowed boardrooms and court-houses that had long been closed to lawyers of color made a difference.

This brings me to the call to action that I make to you today. I am here because lawyers helped to give me a vision. That vision came to fruition because parents and teachers mentored and trained me, but importantly because lawyers, judges, and members of this profession decided that it was essential to diversify. Each of us in this room has the power to open those doors, to continue to keep open the doors that are slowly closing, and to continue to build diversity.

My judge hired me when no other judge on that district had ever hired a black law clerk. The hiring of minority law clerks is still an issue in the profession today.

My law firm, K&L Gates, formerly Hughes & Luce, hired me when most other major law firms in Dallas had not taken that step. And when other lawyers thought I was the court reporter and bailiffs asked me to leave counsel table and clients weren't sure why I was in the room, these were the lawyers who came to my defense.

Outside of my law firm, it was my work in bar associations that grounded me. The work of local and state bars and the ABA is so critical. The Dallas Bar Association gave me the chance in the early 1980s to work on the Minority Participation Committee and to address those issues that would make the profession more receptive to lawyers of color. From scholarships to pipeline programs, these local bars make a difference. They were a place for minority lawyers to develop leadership skills and they must continue that important role.

That I would have led the board of directors of the State Bar of Texas was something I never thought I would do, but other bar leaders encouraged me. I have seen that encouragement given to so many lawyers and have seen the fine work to promote diversity in the Texas Bar.

Finally, I have seen the commitment of the ABA and my home in the ABA, the Section of Litigation. These lawyers are not

only committed to improving the system of justice and jury trials but they also care about the big issues that change our society.

In all of these places, I came to understand that great lawyers focused not just on career paths, billable hours, and profits per partner but they also worked to make the profession better. We must continue this great work. Somewhere out there, little girls are sitting in the back of the room and they might just hear the voice of a lawyer. We must remember the power of our words and know that we have the ability to create visions that can lead to success in others.

Our challenges are great. The number of minority law students is decreasing. Fewer minorities and women remain in law firms. We must be diligent and continue to build the diversity of this great profession.

I thank the Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession for this great award and thank all of you for honoring me with your presence today. **TBJ**

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