



By LaToya Cross

With Atty. Richard Boykin In Celebration Of Diversity!



A society free of racial and social judgment is the message that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. fought for throughout his lifetime, a message of brotherhood where humans regardless of their racial, working, and social status were equally accepted. It was a message of love and unity.

Today we are still fighting to achieve that legacy, that obligation, Dr. King died for.

On August 23, 2011, the law firm of Barnes & Thornburg held their Second Annual Celebration of Diversity at the Union League Club of Chicago to acknowledge business leaders dedicated to the practices of diversity and inclusion. U.S. Congressman John Lewis, a prominent figure during the Civil Rights Movement and one of Dr. King's aides, presided as the event's keynote speaker.

Honorees included Jerry Reinsdorf, chairman of the Chicago Bulls and the Chicago White Sox; Melinda Kelly, Executive Director of the Chatham Business Association; and The Hon. Paul Williams; former Illinois State Representative.

"We really wanted to highlight some of the leaders in the Chicagoland area who are really doing a tremendous job in the area of diversity," said Richard Boykin, a partner in the firm's Chicago and Washington, D.C. offices. "We think that these individuals really epitomize the dream that Dr. Martin Luther King saw and the vision that he had and it's one of those things that I think, honoring them, they're like giants in our midst."

Boykin spoke with N'DIGO about the importance of diversity and inclusion as it relates to building successful business.

N'DIGO: EXPLAIN YOUR VISION AND DEFINITION OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION AS IT RELATES TO THE 21ST CENTURY WORKPLACE AND SOCIETAL VIEWS.

Richard Boykin: I think it was Dr. W.E.B DuBois who said that the problem of the 20th century would be the problem of color lines. So I think that the problem of the 21st century is still that of the color lines.

The real deal is that there are still too many places where you don't see everybody fully in. There are still too many contracts that are still being awarded in Illinois where there is no minority participation. Or where it's minimal minority participation.

I know people look at the fact that we have an African American as president. That's one thing — he can be president of the United States, but until we have African Americans in every corporation, law firm, and every part of our society, I don't think that you'll have that melting pot or that vision that King brought forth.

And that is that people ought to be judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin. They should be judged by their hard work, their values and that's what we're hoping for. We're hoping that we move toward that society where everybody will be appreciated.

WHAT ARE SOME KEY STEPS TO MAKING PEOPLE AWARE THAT THERE IS A CRITICAL NEED FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION?

We have to continue to underscore the injustices in our society and one of the ways that you do it is through media. A lot of people watch the news, read newspapers, but also a lot of people read the blogs, twitter, and that sort of thing, social networking but, ultimately, what it's going to take is education.

I think that it's education that frees us. I say this and I heard a very great person say this, "Hurt people hurt people. Free people free people." We all have to get to the point where we're free so that we can free others.

When I look back at our history and some of the giants like Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglas, Sojourner Truth and others, I mean, we all stand on their shoulders and we have an obligation to push the ball forward for the next generation.

So I'm hoping that we can all stand together, shoulder-to-shoulder, making sure that we do what's necessary in order to get that message through. It's going to take a combination of education and media outreach.

DO YOU SEE PEOPLE MOVING TOWARD A MORE INCLUSIVE SOCIETY AND WORKPLACE?

I think that inclusion now translates into dollars for a lot of companies. The reality of it is if you want to do business in the African American community, chances are you want to have somebody African American on your team. We understand each other. You understand

doing in the places where we have offices. Are we representative of the community?

Each and every one of us has an obligation to reach back and help someone else come along. We can't just sit in these positions and just say, it's good enough because "we're here" whether it be McDonalds, or wherever. We have to constantly push ourselves and we have to constantly push the limits. We have to figure out a way to bring everybody along.



Photo Captions: From left, standing - Richard Boykin, Congressman Danny Davis, B&T Chicago Managing Partner Mark Rust, Jerry Reinsdorf, Congressman John Lewis B&T Firm Managing Partner Alan Levin From left, seated - Melinda Kelly, Paul Williams

different patterns and that sort of thing, but I don't think that we can take the foot off the pedal, yet. I think we have to continue full steam ahead.

I don't think that we are where we need to be with respect to inclusion and diversity. There's still too many boardrooms, again, that aren't too diverse. There are still too many places in law firms that aren't diverse. There are still too many country clubs that may not be diverse. So we have to continue to move forward and spread the message: Diversity really is a good business practice.

HOW HAS GETTING PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND THAT THIS IS A MATTER OF STRENGTHENING BUSINESS IMPACTED YOU AS A LEADER?

Barnes & Thornburg actually elevated diversity as one of the key critical issues that the management committee deals with in each one of their meetings. We're always looking at the numbers, how well are we

It's unconscienable when you look at the unemployment rate in the African American community right now. You have an employment rate a little bit over 9 percent but in the Black community, it's pressing 18.

IF YOU COULD LEAVE OUR READERS WITH ONE MESSAGE, WHAT WOULD YOU SHARE?

I just encourage everybody to grasp hold of this whole thing of diversity and let's work together to make America as strong as we can be. When all of us are working together, and putting the principle of love, the principle of character ahead of color, I think America would be a greater place and a stronger place. Diversity really is good business.