

VOICES ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

# Combating Systemic Racism

BY ANDRE DAVISON

Compassion, empathy, and reaching out to others are key to addressing discriminatory implicit bias.

**T**he tragic incident this summer with George Floyd in Minneapolis brought back memories of my experience with law enforcement 26 years ago that could have dramatically changed my life and the trajectory of my career. My two uncles, my best friend, and I were headed to the beach for the day after my younger uncle's high school prom. As we made our way through the beach entrance, we were pulled over by the Galveston beach patrol for suspicion of an open container violation.

Unbeknownst to me, my best friend, and my younger uncle, my older uncle had a joint in his possession and was reaching to hide it as the officers approached the

car. The officers immediately drew their weapons, and I immediately feared we were going to get shot. Only 16 years old, I was terrified as we were ordered out of the car and placed in handcuffs. Fortunately, my younger uncle was able to diffuse the situation through a conversation with the officers. We were able to leave the beach without any repercussions.

I learned two valuable lessons that day: always keep your hands where police officers can see them and always address police officers with respect.

As I reflect, I realize how fortunate we were to leave those circumstances alive. As our nation saw with George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, and others, so many

I am an African American man who manages the Library Research Services team for an AMLaw 100 law firm. I personally know of only one other African American man who is a director at an AMLaw 200 law firm and have met only a handful of African American men that are law librarians at law firms.

African American men and women don't live to survive similar encounters with law enforcement.

Ironically, two weeks later, I was set to start an internship working for a law firm that would launch my career in law librarianship. I still wonder: If I had been arrested, would I have lost the internship opportunity that changed my career trajectory?

I asked my uncle what he said to the officers that convinced them to release us with a warning. He said that he told them that he was graduating high school in a couple of weeks and planning to attend college in the fall on a scholarship. I am thankful for the compassion and empathy the officers provided that day. We all need to have compassion and empathy to understand and combat systemic racism.

### Looking at the Stats

I have worked in law firms for over 20 years. To accurately describe my perspective, we need to look at data that provides insight into diversity in law firms. The 2019 Vault/MCCA Law Firm Diversity survey helps measure and track diversity progress in the legal industry.

- More than 17 percent of law firm attorneys are Black, indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC).
- Summer associates have the largest BIPOC representation, at 33 percent.
- Twenty-six percent of associates are BIPOC as well.
- Sixteen percent of the partners promoted in 2018 were attorneys of color, compared to 14 percent in 2017.

- Minority attorneys now represent 10 percent of all partners and 9 percent of equity partners.

This data demonstrates that law firms are slow to improve diversity and inclusion in the hiring and promotion of minority attorneys. This situation is similarly reflected in the hiring and promotion of administrative and law librarian professionals.

### A Solitary Path for Black Men in Law Librarianship

I am an anomaly in law firm libraries. I am an African American man who manages the Library Research Services team for an AMLaw 100 law firm. I personally know of only one other African American man who is a director at an AMLaw 200 law firm and have met only a handful of African American men that are law librarians at law firms. Data I could ascertain from the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) Membership Directory show that 9 percent of AALL membership that self-report as minorities work at law firms, and only two percent of minorities that self-report and work at law firms are male. That is not a good representation of people like me who work as law librarians in law firms.

I started working in a law firm library at the age of 16. When I graduated from college, I decided to pursue a career in law librarianship. I was not hired for any of the positions I interviewed for. I assumed I was disqualified because I did not have a master's degree in library science. In 2011, I went to library school to obtain my master's degree. I remember being the only African American man in my Library

School orientation. I graduated in 2014, and I started to apply for positions at law firms. I thought I would immediately find a job opportunity, as I had 15 years of law firm library experience, a master's degree, and corporate experience with a legal information vendor. I interviewed with multiple law firms but was not selected.

Finally, I was able to secure a position with my current firm after one year of searching. I had worked with one of the librarians at a previous firm and would like to think my professional network was an important factor in getting my foot in the door.

At the time I did not think I had experienced any racial bias in my job search, but my perspective changed after reviewing information and analyzing data.

I interviewed at one local law firm three times in my career—once as a library paraprofessional and twice as a library professional. After meeting the staff at the law firm, I realized I was passed over for each position for a Caucasian female. Was it a coincidence? Maybe. But the lack of diversity in law firms and the lack of African American male law librarians in law firms is an indicator of racial bias.

Racial bias is a form of discriminatory implicit bias that clearly impacts the hiring process and supports systemic racism. We can help to eliminate systemic racism in law library employment practices by building bridges and becoming allies through supporting diversity, inclusion, and equity initiatives in law librarianship.

### Moving Ahead: R.E.A.C.H

I was fortunate that my reach provided me with an opportunity at my current firm that has allowed me to flourish in the profession. When I say reach, I am referring to my professional network. Merriam-Webster has multiple definitions of the word, but I want to focus on three.

- To stretch out
- To get up to or far as
- To communicate with

The foundation of my reach is encapsulated in the principles that make up the acronym R.E.A.C.H.:

- Respect
- Empathy
- Accountability
- Compassion
- Hope

My charge to you is to make a commitment to get up, stretch out, and communicate about systemic racism via your R.E.A.C.H.

- Stretch out through Respect and Empathy for minority colleagues who've experienced systemic racism.
- Get up and exercise Accountability by getting involved in your organization's and AALL's diversity and inclusion efforts.
- Communicate with Compassion and Hope for the difficult conversations

that are required in discussion of systemic racism.

- Join the new Black Law Librarians Special Interest Section (BLL-SIS). BLL-SIS provides a forum for the professional development, exchange of ideas, and information on recruitment and social interests of Black law librarians.
- Support the AALL Resolution for a Pipeline Program to Improve Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Law Librarian Profession and the Resolution to Improve Racial and Ethnic Diversity in AALL & the Law Librarian Profession. As of this writing, these resolutions have been reviewed by AALL counsel and AALL President Emily R. Florio, Diane Rodriguez, AALL president-elect, and Vani Ungapen, AALL executive director, are working with the submitters to incorporate recommendations.

As mentioned earlier, I am an anomaly in the profession, but what is not an anomaly is the support of legal information professionals who constantly motivate and inspire me. I am thankful for the R.E.A.C.H. of all law librarians in AALL who have invested time and resources in helping advance my career. I hope to motivate and inspire a diverse and inclusive group of law librarians who will continue to pay it forward.

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