

Triumph and Tribute: How One Law Firm Recognizes Black History Month

In the legal world, victory is a word we often associate with success in the boardroom or courtroom. As it relates to Black History Month, victory transcends that limited meaning. For the past 53 years, the U.S. has observed Black History Month by recognizing the often-overlooked contributions of African-Americans to our economy, our progress and our spirit as a nation. It undoubtedly also shines a light on the injustices that African-Americans continue to face in our society today.

Black History Month presents an array of opportunities to learn – and we still have much to learn. At Armstrong Teasdale, our capacity to provide excellent service and stewardship relies on the diverse identities, experiences and backgrounds of our teams.

Building community is foundational to our success and it's driven by both differences and commonalities. This year, we are excited to launch five designated "interest tracks" under our longstanding Diverse Professionals Group to create opportunities for Black/African-American, Asian American and Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Multicultural and Multilingual lawyers and staff to connect in a safe space on topics that resonate most with them and drive program and policy changes that best support our people internationally. One of those tracks, the Black Engagement Network, is giving back to a variety of local foodbanks and adjacent organizations this month.

The firm will also patronize local African-American small businesses across markets by way of a heritage food festival in February. Consistent with our supplier diversity program, we aim to engage minority-owned, women-owned, veteran-owned and LGBTQ-owned businesses – something we also prioritize during our annual Inclusion Week.



Michelle Rennalls

"Having joined the firm just prior to Inclusion Week 2022, my experience has been consistent with my expectations – I immediately immersed myself in those opportunities. It opened doors for me and helped me instantly build a network of individuals who made me feel at home," said Michelle Rennalls, a legal assistant in the firm's Wilmington office.



Michael Williamson

Michael Williamson, AT's DEI data/compliance analyst based in Wilmington and another recent hire, echoed these sentiments. "I met with various individuals throughout the firm to introduce myself and learn more about their roles here at AT. Everyone was welcoming and open to sharing their backgrounds with me – all very diverse. Everyone conveyed an eagerness to understand the dynamics of DEI, and subsequently, see efforts grow. I am looking forward to being a part of that growth and am confident the firm's data will tell a story as we further invest in DEI and examine the policies and processes that will support our pipeline, recruitment and retention."

Others at the firm also look outward for belonging within the wider community.



Vance Knapp

In Denver, Partner Vance Knapp expresses, in reflection on Black History Month, that, "to this day things are not equal, and we must continue the civil rights struggle to have an equal opportunity – not a greater opportunity, just an equal opportunity in our society. That is triumphant."

Vance's dedication to furthering this dialogue is evident from his involvement with the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity, the Sam Cary Bar Association, the National Employment Law Council, and The Legal Center for People with Disabilities and the Elderly – all of which focus on or serving diverse populations. Lawyers and staff across firm markets are active in these and a range of other affinity groups dedicated to influencing acceptance and diverse practices in the profession.

Another critical aspect of African-American advancement is sponsorship – taking it a step beyond mentorship. We are also set to launch our ATLAS program, designed to create sponsor relationships among our lawyer population to drive achievement and recognition, and create bridges to retain diverse talent.

Further, we will aim to advance students through our Legal Careers Exploration Program for high school and junior college students, and ongoing internship and summer associate programs for diverse law students. In January 2023, legislative affairs intern Alexandre Mugisha joined our Jefferson City, Missouri, office from Lincoln University, one of just two Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the state.



Favour Okechukwu

In Philadelphia, Villanova University J.D. candidate Favour Okechukwu, M.Sc. has worked with AT as both an intellectual property extern and summer associate. "I have had the pleasure of meeting so many leaders throughout the firm network who have sponsored me and given me opportunities to work alongside some of the best and brightest lawyers," she said. "As a 3L, I feel incredibly prepared for life after graduation and am grateful to bring these experiences back to my role at Villanova as the Student Bar Association's Diversity and Inclusion chairwoman." Following her graduation in May 2023, Okechukwu will join the firm full-time.

As we look to individuals like Mugisha and Okechukwu as our future, we must also pay tribute to those who paved the way for us. People like Thurgood Marshall, the Hon. Ketanji Brown Jackson and Steve Cousins, an Armstrong Teasdale alum who is widely recognized for achieving a number of firsts as a Black lawyer. Please join us in continuing the triumph and the tribute.

