

**TAKING INITIATIVE:** Judy Mercier leads Holland & Knight's new program.

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## Entrepreneur Opportunities for all

Holland & Knight's new Diversity Council to further shape firm's corporate culture.

BY CINDY BARTH | MANAGING EDITOR

### DiversityWorks

*A monthly look at Central Florida's  
changing workplaces*

Paul M. Thomas has spent a good number of years advising corporations on ways to enhance their cultural diversity performance and profiles. Now, he's turning his attention toward something a little more closer to home: Thomas has been named the first chief diversity officer at Holland & Knight LLP.



Thomas

In his new position, Thomas is chairing the firm's 13-member Diversity Council from his Washington, D.C., office and is in charge of overseeing the diversity initiatives and programs in the national law firm's 18 offices in the United States. Locally, included among the other 12 council members are Managing Partner Howell Melton Jr., who spends his time commuting between Holland & Knight's New York and Orlando offices; and Judy Mercier, head of the firm's Women's Initiative and a commercial litigator in the Orlando office.



Melton

The council is a natural extension of what has been a long-standing policy at Holland & Knight first spearheaded by firm founder Chesterfield Smith, Thomas says, describing Smith as "visionary in his quest to



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include women and minorities in leadership positions."

Smith, in fact, is credited with being one of the first to actively recruit minorities and to recognize the national trend of increasing enrollment of women in law schools by recruiting many to his firm. His first recruit, Martha Barnett, later became president of the American Bar Association, the second woman to serve in that role.

"It was important to Chesterfield Smith that Holland & Knight be a role model for diversity," says Melton. "Even though he's no longer here to see the formation of this

council, I think it's safe to say he would be cheering us on in launching it."

### Setting the tone

Included in Holland & Knight's Diversity Council is a series of what Thomas describes as "affinity initiatives." These will focus on the needs and interests of African-American, Asian/Pacific, Islander, Hispanic and Native American employees, in addition to already-established initiatives that focus on women and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues.

The goal, Thomas says, is to "set a tone

and emphasize our core values in each office.”

Even so, challenges always abound in creating more opportunities for a diverse work force, Thomas says, a supposition national studies appear to support.



**Chair:** Paul Thomas

**Description:** The council will oversee diversity initiatives and programs at the firm's 18

offices nationwide.

**Members:** 13, including Thomas (Washington, D.C.), diversity partner and chief diversity officer; Howell Melton Jr. (New York, Orlando), managing partner; Martha Bennett (Tallahassee), chair of the Directors Committee; Judy Mercier (Orlando), chair of the Women's Initiative; Dianne Phillips (Boston), co-chair of the Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender Initiative; Tiffani Lee (Miami), chair of the African-American/Black Initiative; Jorge Hernandez-Torano (Miami), chair of the Hispanic Initiative; Tasha Nguyen (Los Angeles), chair of the Asian/Pacific Islander Initiative; Aurene Martin (Washington, D.C.), chair of the Native American/American Indian Initiative; Steve Hanlon (Washington, D.C.), leader of the Community Services Team; and Ben Volinski (Boston), Local Office Diversity Committee representative. Two additional positions will be filled with an associate and a member of the staff.

**Contact:** [www.hklaw.com](http://www.hklaw.com)

According to the National Association for Law Placement, for instance, only about 17 percent of the partners at major law firms nationwide were women in 2005, a figure that has risen only slightly since 1995, when about 13 percent of partners were women. And the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that by 2008, 70 percent of all new entrants into the work force will be women and people of color.

While Holland & Knight has made great strides in those areas — the firm was recognized in *Minority Law Journal's* 2005 Diversity Scorecard of the country's 260 largest law firms as being No. 2 in the number of minority partners and in the top five in the number of African-American and Hispanic attorneys — that doesn't mean it is content to rest on its laurels, Thomas says.

“We're hoping that by offering opportunities for high-level, top management input, we can continue to be a leader in these efforts,” he says.

#### Forums for everyone

One way that input will be accomplished is through corporate efforts such as the Women's Initiative, which first began in the mid-1990s.

For Mercier, having an opportunity to chair that is something she takes very seriously, having already benefited from Holland & Knight's Rising Stars program, a year-long mentoring program in which five participants in their seventh year of practice

and beyond are selected to receive intense training toward eventual leadership roles at the firm. Mercier now is in a position where she can, in turn, help shape policies and programs as they relate to other women in the work force.

“What initially attracted me to Holland & Knight was its corporate culture that recognized the important role women and minorities play,” she says. “The council gives us another framework in which to work together, and we know from experience that teamwork produces the best overall results, because people feel engaged in the process.”

Mercier says she is optimistic the new council will help lead Holland & Knight forward in its diversity efforts. Of particular importance, she says, is Melton's support as managing partner of the firm.

“Howell strongly supports these initiatives, which is critical support to have in making the workplace better for all of our employees,” Mercier says.

For Melton, the diversity initiatives are important on a number of levels, from helping the firm attract and retain a diverse work force to meeting the distinct needs of the firm's employees.

After all, notes Melton, “Our clients receive the highest quality of service when their legal teams are drawn from an experienced pool of professionals reflective of the marketplace in which we work. It's simply the right thing to do.”