

Wisconsin Hispanic Lawyers Association celebrates 25 years of service to the legal profession and the public

by Andrew J. Chevrez & Micabil Diaz-Martinez

More than two decades ago, a small group of Hispanic attorneys regularly met at the Camino Real restaurant on the south side of Milwaukee to socialize and discuss some of the challenges they faced in the legal profession. From these informal gatherings, the Wisconsin Hispanic Lawyers Association (WHLA) was born. On Nov. 8, the WHLA celebrated its 25th anniversary. This article briefly chronicles the WHLA's trajectory and outlines some of its contributions to the legal profession.

Formative years. In the early 1980s, only a few Hispanic lawyers practiced law in Wisconsin. One of the WHLA's principal founders, former Waukesha County Circuit Court judge Jess Martinez Jr., envisioned the association as a place where Hispanic lawyers could speak in a unified voice about important issues affecting the Hispanic community, such as the lack of professional opportunities for Hispanic lawyers and access to justice for people of color. For José A. Olivieri, the WHLA provided structure to the personal relationships that he had formed with fellow Hispanic lawyers and functioned as a vehicle to discuss ways to make the legal system more receptive and fair to Hispanics. The pioneers who formed the WHLA and comprised its initial membership roster also included former Waukesha County Circuit Court judge Ness Flores, current Milwaukee County Circuit Court judge Elsa C. Lamelas, and attorneys Joseph M. Rivas, David Robles, Margaret Aguayo Asterlin, Miguel A. Michel, and Narciso L. Aleman. Joseph Rivas was the first president.

The association's mission is to "advance the professional interests of its members and to advise on issues of interest to the Hispanic Community on a local and national level." Early on, the WHLA worked on issues relating to access to justice such as court interpretation, bilingual signage, and court forms. Its members volunteered their time and provided free legal information at community



Wisconsin Hispanic Lawyers Association past presidents gathered in 2006: (from left) Pedro A. Colón, Carmen Ortiz-Babilonia (current president), Ness Flores, Andrew J. Chevrez, Neifor B. Acosta, Micabil Diaz-Martinez, Israel Ramon, Joseph M. Rivas, and José A. Olivieri. Photo © 2006 Mary Catanese

festivals held by La Casa de Esperanza and Mexican Fiesta. The association held annual Christmas parties, to gather together its members and other legal professionals in a social setting. This tradition has expanded throughout the years.

Continued growth. The WHLA started to attain critical mass during the 1990s as more Hispanic lawyers began practicing in Wisconsin. A new wave of members brought new ideas and perspectives about the WHLA's role in the legal profession. It began to form partnerships and participate in joint projects with other bar associations, including the State Bar of Wisconsin, the Milwaukee Bar Association, the Milwaukee Young Lawyers Association (MYLA), and the Wisconsin Association of African-American Attorneys. WHLA members regularly participated in community service projects such as the MYLA Landlord-Tenant Hotline, and its members remain steadfast supporters of Law Day, on which they provide free bilingual legal information.

Perhaps the greatest resource available to an association is its members. WHLA members practice in diverse fields, and they bring their unique talents and skills to WHLA projects. Examples of projects spearheaded by WHLA members include the state's first

Office of Lawyer Regulation keeps pace with workload, improves processing time, according to annual report

According to its fiscal year 2007 annual report, during the year the Office of Lawyer Regulation (OLR) reduced the number of pending matters at year end (619) compared to the end of last year (817) and decreased the overall average processing time from 201 days last year to 163 days this year.

"The system is adequately resourced to keep pace with new matters," says Keith Sellen, OLR director. "As a result, the system should continue to improve its timeliness."

The report provides an overview of the lawyer regulation system's organization and composition, explains how matters are resolved, and compares current and past years' data on the disposition of grievance matters. In addition to the year-end results noted, other highlights for the period July 1, 2006 – June 30, 2007, include:

- Central Intake received 1,896 inquiries and grievances (165 fewer than last year):
 - 8% resolved minor disputes or withdrawn grievances
 - 8% diverted to alternative programs
 - 16% forwarded for formal investigation

- 68% closed, insufficient information to allege ethical misconduct
 - 58 attorneys received a public disciplinary sanction, representing 0.3 % of the 22,637 State Bar members
 - Most common allegations made in grievances: lack of diligence (23%), lack of communication with client (14%), improper advocacy (11%)
 - Practice areas producing the most grievances: criminal law (33%), family law (20%)
 - 96 overdrafts on client trust accounts and fiduciary accounts reported, an increase of 15.6 % from last year
- The assessment for fiscal year 2008 is set at \$144 (for full active licensed lawyers) up from \$129 in 2007. The complete 2006 – 07 report and accompanying appendices are available at <http://wicourts.gov/about/organization/offices/docs/olr0607fiscal.pdf>.



Keith Sellen
director, Office
of Lawyer
Regulation

pro se courthouse clinic, created in Milwaukee by Ernesto Romero. Association members also testified before the Wisconsin Supreme Court in support of the efforts of Milwaukee County Circuit judge Elsa C. Lamelas, Francisco Araiza, and others to develop a statewide code of interpreter ethics and an interpreter certification process.

From time to time, the WHLA has seen the need to speak out about issues that affect Hispanics. For example, the association has led in educating the Wisconsin legislature about the disparate legal impact that English-only laws would have on Hispanics in areas such as education, health care, and the justice system. Most recently, it has been vocal about attempts by city and municipal governments to create laws that seek to enforce immigration laws, a function exclusively reserved to the federal government.

Professional development is a key component of the WHLA's mission, and it

begins with maintaining ties with the Hispanic law student associations of both Wisconsin law schools. The WHLA

strives to welcome and mentor new Hispanic lawyers and invites them to take part in networking opportunities and referrals. As the WHLA has grown, it has become a focal point for employers seeking qualified and diverse job applicants. The WHLA advocates for diversity not only on the bench but also in private and public practice. Finally, the WHLA helps keep members informed about issues related to the unique challenges many of its members face in representing Spanish-speaking clients.

The future is now. With more than 80 members, the WHLA has attained significant progress since the days when lawyers gathered at Camino Real. However, much is yet to be accomplished. Thanks to its vibrant and diverse members, the association can continue its mission and expand on many of its initiatives. The WHLA looks to become an increasingly relevant resource to the legal profession as Wisconsin's Hispanic population grows.

WHLA Presidents

- Carmen Ortiz-Babilonia, 2007-08
- Micabil Diaz-Martinez, 2006-07
- Neifor B. Acosta, 2005-06
- David A. Westrup, 2004-05
- Ana M. Berrios, 2003-04
- Francisco Araiza, 2002-03
- Ernesto Romero, 2001-02
- Margaret Aguayo Asterlin, 2000-01
- Pedro A. Colón, 1999-00
- Israel Ramon, 1998-99
- Andrew J. Chevez, 1997-98
- Edward A. Fallone, 1996-97
- Peter L. Ramirez, 1995-96
- Harold O.M. Rocha, 1994-95
- Michael Reyes, 1990-94
- Ness Flores, 1988-90
- José A. Olivieri, 1986-88
- Joseph M. Rivas, 1984-86