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Katten Celebrated Juneteenth With DEI Discussion

(NEW YORK) Katten announced today that the firm hosted an event in observance of Juneteenth that focused on prioritizing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the face of recent political headwinds and the economic downturn.

“(Juneteenth) is our holiday as American citizens, because anything that happened like what happened in Galveston that got us closer to the true ideals of what this country is supposed to be about is something we should all celebrate,” event moderator, Katten partner and national chair of the Commercial Litigation practice David Crichlow said, referring to Galveston, Texas, where on June 19, 1865, a Union Army general informed Texas citizens about the freedom that had been granted to some 250,000 enslaved Black people in the state of Texas as a result of the Emancipation Proclamation — enacted two and a half years earlier. Blacks had remained slaves in Texas through 1865 because, geographically, Texas was the most remote and distant of the Confederate states, and news of their freedom had not reached Texas until 1865. Thus, June 19, or Juneteenth as it became known, is celebrated as the true end of slavery in the United States.

The Katten event, called “Navigating DEI Partnerships Program” and co-sponsored by Cornell Black Lawyers Alumni Network, marked the momentous Galveston event and featured as speakers a group of business leaders of color: managing director and chair of the Americas Advisory Council at UBS, Duane Hughes; managing director and head of Compliance Training at Morgan Stanley, Alita Wingfield; and vice president, deputy general counsel and global chief compliance officer at medical technology firm Convatec, Michael Clarke.

They discussed whether the current economic environment could adversely affect DEI, the importance of maintaining a strong commitment to DEI, creative opportunities for partnerships on DEI initiatives and how best to combat any slowing enthusiasm for greater diversity and inclusion.

What can be helpful in building partnerships is for law firms to take a close look at their clients and see where their values are aligned on DEI, said Hughes. “If we can at least have some type of conversation around your talent pool, and what our needs are, secondments and lending us

(talent) and developing this culture with your clients, being strategic and very focused about it, that tends to lead towards opportunities,” he said.

A commitment at the executive and governance levels of a company can impact the durability of DEI programs, according to Clarke. “If you have people who are willing to make that commitment and stand by it, yes, you want to have measurements, you want to have reports, but then you must have a philosophy where we will sustain this regardless of economic setbacks or other corporate changes because it’s a good business practice,” he said.

What also helps preserve such programs is producing annual transparent reports on DEI strategy and goals, as well as workforce demographics, said Wingfield. Programs centered on DEI can be more difficult to cut if diversity and inclusion is a core value for the company, she added. “You have to build programs that are sustainable, that are embedded into to your fiber. So when (economic) headwinds like that come, budgets don’t directly affect them,” said Wingfield. “Where we have to watch is when you have reductions in force to make sure it’s not disproportionately affecting your Black and Latino employees, that rigor and governance has to be built in.”

The Juneteenth event was the latest offering in the slate of Katten DEI-focused programming, which this year included the firm’s Black History Month celebration featuring author, educator and journalist Jelani Cobb as part of Katten’s Perspectives Speaker Series.

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