

Judicate West offers free training to diversify neutral panel

Rosemarie Drohan, the ADR company's executive vice president of business development, said the scholarship program was conceived following years of efforts to recruit women and people of color into the field.



Judicate West is offering free training to prospective neutrals to diversify its panel.

The company's Diversity & Inclusion Annual Scholarship program launched in November, but Rosemarie Drohan, the company's executive vice president of business development, said the company delayed announcing it to coincide with Black History Month in February and Women's History Month in March. The company has invited people to apply for an all-expenses paid, five-day Mediation Training Program at the Straus Institute at Pepperdine University in Malibu.

Drohan said the scholarship program was conceived following years of efforts to recruit women and people of color into the field.

"It's not happening quickly enough," Drohan said. "It is our hope to reach out and develop talent in diverse communities for years to come. This isn't a one-shot deal. It's something we plan to do from here on in. It's part of our culture."

Drohan said her company is reaching out to bar associations from underrepresented communities to find people with enough experience to work in the field.

"It's definitely getting better," Drohan said of the company's diversity efforts. "More judges are retiring. I feel like lawyers are leaving practices at younger age and not keeping that traditional path of needing to be with a law firm for 30 years and then getting into this kind of work."

Drohan said the firm's panel is "about 1/3" women.

She added, "I would say with women, it's going better. With other diverse communities, there's more work to be done."

The company has recently added two diverse hires, retired Sacramento Superior Court Judges Russell L. Hom and Emily E. Vasquez. Reached Wednesday, Vasquez said she went through the Strauss program, though she paid for some of the expenses out of pocket. She said the parties "get a better result" when they have a diverse panel to choose from.

Since joining the company in 2022, Vasquez said she has had numerous opportunities to speak Spanish, which she said was her first language.

“Sometimes being able to talk to the parties directly in their language and make them feel comfortable has helped me in establishing that rapport and trust and mutual respect,” Vasquez said.

Sometimes cultural misunderstandings can be subtle, she added. For instance, in American legal culture, people tend to think a witness is not trustworthy or honest if they won't look attorneys and others in the eye. However, in some cultures, she said, too much eye contact is considered disrespectful.

“To be a more effective mediator, arbitrator, lawyer and judge, we must communicate in a neutral, culturally sensitive manner,” Vasquez said. “The hardest part of cross-cultural communications is willingly putting aside pre-conceived notions, beliefs, and misguided stereotypes about other cultures.”

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