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# Fostering a More Diverse Future

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*A look at how the SDCBA's award-winning Diversity Fellowship Program affects the future of inclusion in the legal profession*

***Compiled by Jeremy Evans***

## **About the Program:**

The San Diego County Bar Association's Diversity Fellowship Program (DFP or Program) was created in response to the low number of diverse attorneys practicing law in San Diego County law firms and corporate legal departments. The Program provides an opportunity for diverse, first year law students to learn and develop skills necessary to be successful in the practice of law and exposes law firms and corporate legal departments to qualified individuals who might not otherwise be considered. The Program is modeled after similar initiatives in California's Bay Area; Puget Sound and Seattle, WA; Cleveland and Columbus, OH; St. Louis, MO and Atlanta, GA.

This article highlights a 2014 DFP Fellow and Employer who provide their thoughts and experiences with the Program.

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# The DFP Fellow

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By Heather Ray

Even before I sat for my first law school class, I knew that being a Diversity Fellow was the only way I wanted to spend my post-1L summer. I had attended a Scholar's Day at California Western School of Law at which a graduating student spoke about her experiences with the San Diego County Bar Association's Diversity Fellowship Program (DFP). Immediately, I resolved to do the same and lay the best foundation possible for my career. The application for the DFP is thorough and effectively identifies candidates who are dedicated and driven despite being new to the legal world. Each student-applicant is tasked with providing a personal definition of what makes him or her diverse, and in turn, an equally diverse and unparalleled opportunity is made available to the selected DFP fellows that make it through the application, interview, and selection process.

My DFP experience has been beyond measure. For eight weeks this summer, I was incredibly fortunate to enhance my professional development and build essential legal skills by working at Wilson Turner Kosmo LLP (WTK). The position was a far cry from data entry and photocopying as my role at the firm simulated the tasks of an associate attorney. I was responsible for high-level legal writing and research assignments seldom given to students coming out of their first year of law school. I was also exposed to various facets of civil litigation at one of San Diego's most respected law firms. Moreover, whether attending an expert deposition, a trial, or discussing discovery responses, I was included in real-time conversations and had my personal input requested from practicing attorneys. I have found mentors

at WTK who entrusted me with specific projects for their cases and also made time to provide invaluable direction and feedback.

The daily experience I gained at WTK was only the beginning, however, because I recognized that being a Diversity Fellow would open doors. For example, I was immensely proud to represent California Western in the legal community. The DFP features both required and optional events, and I took advantage of every occasion as a unique educational and networking opportunity. I listened, I asked questions, and I engaged, and the results paid in dividends. As a novice in the legal field, I was humbled by the respect I received from community leaders throughout San Diego upon learning of my involvement in the DFP as a Fellow. By utilizing the Fellowship as a stepping-stone in conjunction with my personal strengths, I have already secured employment for later terms of law school and have directed a distinguished attorney to California Western for future speaking engagements. There is no question in my mind that such achievements would not have materialized without making the very most of the exceptional opportunity I was gifted in becoming a Diversity Fellow.

I am most honored to have made my foray into law through the DFP, and my gratitude to Wilson Turner Kosmo for the enthusiasm and resources shared is boundless. The lasting beauty of the DFP is that it paints in broad strokes, benefitting all expertise levels and leaving an indelible impression on "America's finest" legal community, our very own San Diego. 🏛️

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Frederick Kosmo



Dessi Nintcheva

## The DFP Employer

By Frederick Kosmo and Dessi Nintcheva

Wilson Turner Kosmo LLP has participated in the Diversity Fellowship Program since its inception. For Wilson Turner Kosmo LLP, diversity is not simply hype, it is a reality. Diversity is in the firm's DNA. Wilson Turner Kosmo LLP prides itself on a high quality diverse workforce. By recruiting top talent with diverse qualifications, backgrounds and experiences, the firm has managed to compete successfully in an increasingly global market place. Currently 67 percent of the firm's attorneys are women and 30 percent are minorities.

"We believe that to stay competitive and meet the needs of our clients we must pool from the largest and most diverse set of candidates," said Fred Kosmo, one of the firm's named partners. "We see diversity as an opportunity. We are a nation of diverse entrepreneurs and it is essential for our firm to capitalize on the talent of women, minorities and gay people in continuing to serve an increasingly diverse client base."

The firm is passionate about continuing

to support quality organizations that promote diversity in the legal workplace. Some of those organizations include the Lawyers Club of San Diego, the Earl B. Gilliam Bar Association, the National Association of Women and Minority Owned Law Firms (NAMWOLF), San Diego La Raza Lawyers Association and the National Bar Association.

Consistent with this goal, the firm has vowed to continue to support the SDCBA Diversity Fellowship Program, with Fred Kosmo and me spearheading the effort. The firm is particularly proud of and would like to recognize its past and present Diversity Fellows, including Silvia Paz Romero, Anne Perrera, Adabela Bonillo and Heather Ray. 🏛️

**Dessi Nintcheva is an attorney (dnintcheva@wilsonturnerkosmo.com) with Wilson Turner Kosmo LLP and Frederick Kosmo (fkosmo@wilsonturnerkosmo.com) is a partner with the firm.**

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## A Win-Win Program

While the SDCBA's Diversity Fellowship Program offers law student Fellows unparalleled opportunities to gain "hands-on" experience working in the legal field, participating DFP employers often note that they also benefit from working with the students.

When discussing Wilson Turner Kosmo LLP's (WTK) 2014 DFP Fellow Heather Ray, WTK attorney Robert Rodriguez remarked, "Heather was a joy to work with. We asked her to participate in some trial work, and she went to court with us on most of the days. Because she took several years off between college and law school, I felt like she had some great 'real world' insights into how the jury might be viewing our case. She became a valued member of the trial team."

"Heather is intelligent, personable and highly motivated," Dessi Nintcheva added. "Her desire to learn and strong work ethic will take her far in her career."