

In the past six years, the WSBA Leadership Institute (WLI) has graduated more than 70 Washington attorneys from its program — attorneys who have gone on to serve on numerous boards, committees, and in other noteworthy leadership positions within the Bar and in the legal community. Developed in 2005 by Ronald R. Ward (2005 WSBA president), the WLI is a leadership program designed to provide professional growth and skill development for early-career attorneys. Program participants have been selected with an emphasis on diversity (racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, disability, cultural, and geographic). In addition, the WLI has served as a model for other bar associations, leading the way to the establishment of other “leadership institutes” in bar Associations across the country.

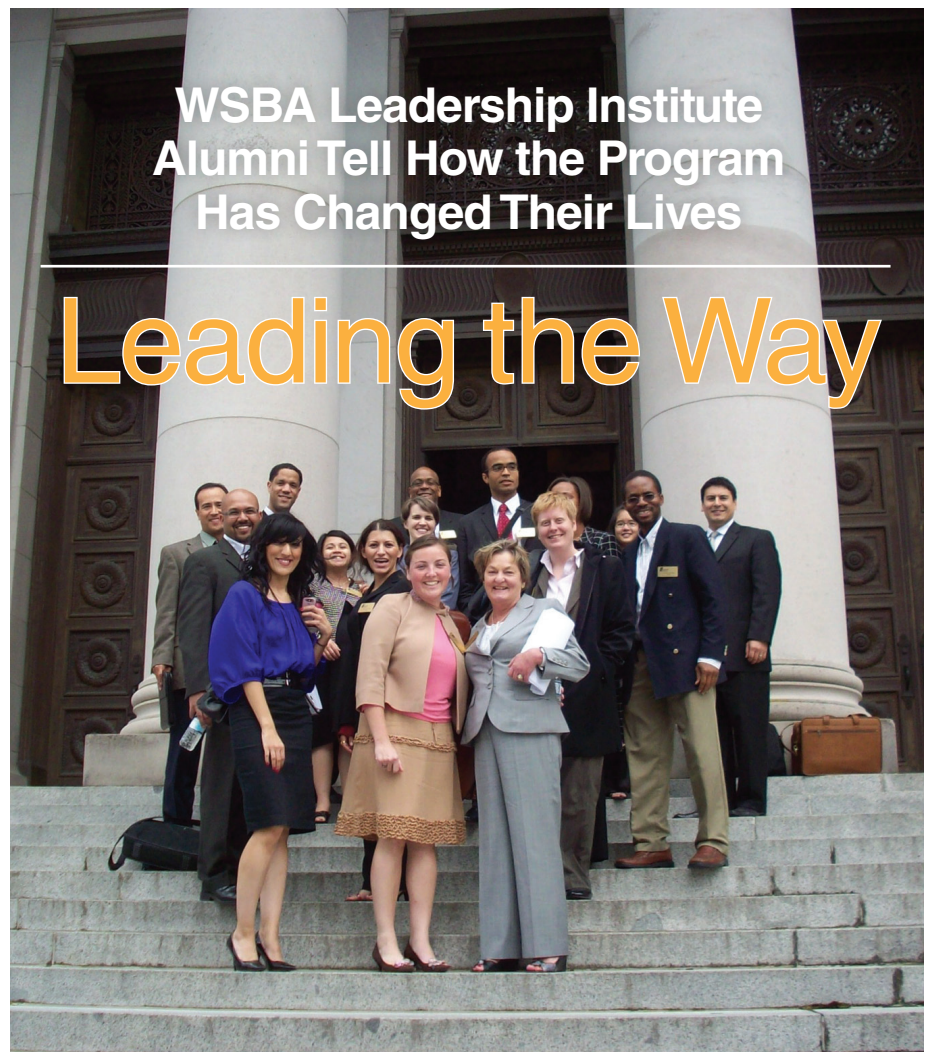
I recently sat down with four WLI alumni — **Beth A. Bloom**, Frank Freed Subit & Thomas (2005 class), **Shankar Narayan**, ACLU of Washington (2006 class), **Dainen Penta**, McKisson Sargent & Oliason (2007 class), and **Lincoln Beauregard**, Connelly Law Office (2009 class) — to discuss how the WLI has changed their lives professionally and personally.

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Let's first talk about why you applied to the program. What was it about the WLI that motivated you to get involved?

Shankar: I was actually involved in the program even before it was created. There was this informal subgroup of the King County Bar Association that was meeting to try and figure out how to improve diversity in the legal profession. We came up with the Future of the Law Institute (a program to encourage minority high school students to consider a career in law) to increase the pipeline, and then [the WSBA created] a leadership institute to actually help young attorneys of color lead. I was much more involved in the Future of the Law Institute, and so wasn't really paying that much attention to what was happening to the Leadership Institute. The next thing I knew, it was this fully fledged program.

The reason I got involved was because it seemed like a great way for me to meet a lot of the people who mattered in our profession. It was a great way to talk about the things that mattered to me, such as the diversity in our profession...and to get outside the usual mode of talking about billable hours, which is what I most associated with being a lawyer.



And on top of that, it was a great way to get a lot of CLE credits. I appreciated that.

Beth: I was drawn to the idea that this was an opportunity, like Shankar said, to meet a wide variety of leaders. That was exciting and interesting to me. I wanted some help and guidance, and maybe even some mentoring (even though I didn't realize it at the time) to take it to the next level, all in terms of my professional development, particularly in the area of community service. The notion of lawyers as leaders and the idea of community involvement being a critical component of the profession was the draw. To be able to do that in the context of a program whose overall goal was greater diversity in the profession made it all the more exciting. It was win-win for me. And the CLE credits. I don't think I'll ever need CLE credits again. [Laughter.]

Lincoln: I don't have a great story of something internally driving me. There wasn't some big deliberation about changing the world. The truth of the matter is, I remember

getting an e-mail about the WLI and saw that there was a deadline and said, “Oh man, I'm going to miss a deadline!” [Laughter.] One of the reasons why I was interested was that I saw names like Judge Yu (whom I didn't really know personally) and James Williams, people whose reputation I was familiar with, and I thought, “These are cool people associated with the program.” I'm glad I did it. Because as far as first impressions of the WLI, I had no idea what I was getting into. But the level of enthusiasm and organization on the part of the people who were involved was inspiring to me. It was so nice to see such an organized network of people involved and invested in the program. That made an impression on me.

Dainen: I got pushed by Beth here. Beth and I were both on the board of Q-Law and she was really encouraging me and others to apply. That's how I got involved. You could say that Q-Law was formed because of the Leadership Institute. But I didn't really start figuring out ways to get more involved in the Bar until my second year of practice. The key

piece was getting oriented to the structure of the Bar and what it offers. That was a really important for me.

Beth: Dainen's right, the GBLT [bar association] was an outgrowth through the WLI. We were certainly aware that there wasn't a GBLT-related statewide bar association. This was an obvious voice that was missing. But I don't think that I would have had the personal "gunpowder" necessary to lift an organization off the ground from nothing, and also wouldn't have understood the depth of the importance of that organization and that voice had I not been involved in the Leadership Institute. So, to invite and encourage Dainen to apply was also a natural outgrowth, too...the importance of mentoring new leaders. Part of the message of the WLI is the message that you can do this and that you don't have to wait for someone else.

Shankar: I will say, Beth, that anytime you want to be lectured at, let me know. [Laughter.]

How did those personal conversations during the sessions affect you later as went about your day as lawyers?

Shankar: If I had to describe in one word what I got out of the WLI, it would be relationships. Because it's been a while, I don't remember every single session, but what I do remember is that everybody there was incredibly enthusiastic...and these were some of the leading lights of our bar association. . . . It was incredibly helpful to hear about their career paths. You see these people today and you think, "Boy, this person has been on the fast track to success their whole life," and you figure out that it isn't so...that they actually had a lot of challenges,

issues, and b) they are all still talking to each other through the WLI. They come with this connection that allows them to take these relationships out into the world and put diversity on the ground in our profession and run with it. I think our minority bar associations have become stronger because of the WLI, which is pretty cool.

Lincoln: I want to go back to your original question as to how the WLI changed us. If I were to think about what being a part of the WLI and the impact that it had on me as far as maintaining my life, my career — I feel a greater responsibility to live up to a standard, and not necessarily in a bad way, but to challenge myself. If I'm going to do something career-wise and I cross paths with so-and-so, I want to be able to say I'm making the organization proud. [Laughter.] Being a part of an organization that is trying to get



Previous page: Members of the WLI Class of 2009 join Justice Susan Owens on the steps of the Temple of Justice in Olympia. This page, above left: Mentors share their stories with a WLI class. Above right: Lincoln Beauregard (second from left) and members of his WLI class observe a legislative session in Olympia.

Did you have any expectations when you came into the program?

Beth: I definitely had an expectation, and my expectation was that I would be lectured at. I was immediately surprised at the level of investment that the leaders had and also in their intimacy. A lot of the presentations — the bulk of them, I would say — are based on personal stories, personal narratives, many of which deal with issues that aren't talked about, issues that are certainly not talked about in law schools, such as how the language of race or sexual orientation or gender impacts your interaction or capacity to succeed in the profession. Given the candor of the presenters, it was natural to want to fall in line with that intimacy and belief in yourself. And that was very different from what I expected, which was a bunch of CLEs with PowerPoint presentations. [Laughter.] So, I was like, "Wow, this is real. We're having a real conversation here and that was great."

some of which came from being attorneys of color. It was really inspiring to hear the ways in which they were able to overcome those challenges. And this kind of candor gives you the sense that if they can do it, you can do it, too. There were a lot of impressive people in my class that I've been in awe of since we were together in the class. In fact, it's really interesting that I think within a year of our class, at least four of them or maybe more actively changed jobs. They went for it, and I think that took a lot of courage.

Beth: Yourself included.

Shankar: Myself included. Not quite within a year, but yes. I had significant changes that were inspired by what I learned at the WLI. Regarding the minority bar associations, I see the WLI giving a big boost to those efforts because a) it's a steady stream of committed minority attorneys who are really interested and knowledgeable about these

ahead, I think it's good to prompt that a little bit. Secondly, I can think back specifically to challenges that I had in the workplace that made me reflect upon my experiences with the WLI. Sure, I was Mr. Diversity, and when I was in law school everybody was rah-rah diversity, but I had times when I did say to myself, am I doing what I need to do to make sure my firm is committed to diversity? And have I made a commitment to myself to have a little empathy and understanding when I'm in a position of authority and not just preach it, especially with people who may not be exactly like me? Did being in the WLI change anything that I did specifically? I don't know, but it did make me stop and reflect on this from the perspective of somebody other than myself in specific work place situations.

Shankar: [The WLI] doesn't necessarily institute this big change of who you are or what you've been doing. For me, it reinforced the commitments that you already

have if you are thinking about diversity. For example, to see a group whose entire focus is around diversity issues and to have that be openly acknowledged, not just through lip service but through actual action is very powerful . . . I've had the same experiences of going back and thinking, "You know, we've been talking about this stuff for a long time, now I'm in a position to make these hiring decisions. How do I make sure that that really is effectuated on the ground?"

Dainen: The format [of the WLI] kind of presents itself as experiential learning, but for lawyers, a lot of time what that means is that it's a CLE with PowerPoints and somebody up at the front doing a talk. But the experience of the program was so much richer than that. I think that was brought by the faculty and by learning so much from the experiences of your classmates, and meeting

deal? Why is a program like the WLI necessary?" Could you speak to that?

Shankar: Everyone wants to move beyond this diversity discussion. I think you will find that minority lawyers are probably the ones who want to move beyond it the most. We wish we didn't have to talk about this. But I think the reality is when you look at our legal profession, we're just not doing a very good job. We still continue to have the same kind of imbalances that we've had for a long time. Not only that, but we're fighting the really thorny problem of retaining people of color. The simple fact is, we haven't succeeded in making our workplaces friendly, where people of diverse backgrounds feel empowered or want to be able to make a long-term career. What you see is that many minority attorneys end up quitting after a few years and end

law firms so that we can all feel good about ourselves; it's about people's lives that are on the line.

Lincoln: When you talk about diversifying the legal community, I think it's important to not make broad brushstrokes and generalizations about what the legal community is like and why it's not more diverse. I'm a believer that the climate is changing and that the challenges of being a person of color in the legal community are greatly reduced from what it was a couple of years ago, even 10 years ago. I think that most people you meet in the legal community are committed to the idea of diversity. What they do to implement that is a different story, but I don't think that if you go into [a large law firm], you'll find people in the upper levels of the organization who are saying, "I don't want to promote or encourage a diverse workplace." It definitely



Above left: Justice Susan Owens gives WLI fellows a tour of the Supreme Court. Above right: Beth A. Bloom (on left) with some members of the WLI Class of 2005.

other fellows of past and future programs. Another huge benefit of the program is really the visibility within the program and the other practitioners. A lot of us plan CLEs now and say, "I'm looking for an attorney with a specific kind of experience," and you can look at the classes and say, "I know somebody." It makes life a lot easier in that regard. I think of the toughest things, in my class at least, and the most rewarding things, was all the talk we did about the jobs we were in. I think a lot of us really liked the program because we were able to just talk to each other, particularly when we did the Private vs. Public Sector session. We looked at what we are doing now and it fits in with our values (before law school) and how have our values have changed since then.

You've probably had this question framed in many different ways. People will say, "We're moving towards a more diverse society; we're doing okay. What's the big

up going to a different workplace where they feel they are able to call the shots a little bit more. And to me that does speak of failure on the part of the legal profession to address these issues. There's no doubt, to me, that we need a program like this. But there is also the broader picture that we're facing, particularly in the criminal justice system. The criminal justice system is probably the part of our society that the civil rights movement has touched the least. And I see this every day down in Olympia, for example, where I am fighting against bills that would actually exacerbate the disparities that are currently present in our criminal justice system. You realize that you have to be able to have people of color...diverse attorneys at the table who really are able to understand the effects of these huge disparities in our system. And if we can't do that, then we can't say that we have a justice system. It's not just about making a nice-looking bouquet of people in

occurs, but I don't think that's the standard anymore. Maybe I'm living in a fiction, but I think we're in a community that is receptive to that. I think the WLI is important, not so much in reminding external people about the commitment to diversity as it is reminding the people who have come to the program to have a commitment to diversity. Don't get me wrong, but times are changing and shifting to where the responsibility for diversifying the legal community is falling more and more on individuals to find ways to make themselves a part of the community, to make themselves excel. Internal impediments could be just as challenging, but I think an organization like [the WLI] can help to remind you about the challenges that you have to face internally by working through them with your colleagues who are more like yourself. I think an organization like this is important for personal development and awareness in terms of the challenges that you may face personally... so that you're doing what you can do to

make yourself a part of the diverse legal community.

Beth: I agree with what Lincoln said, but I think that part of the elephant in the room is the way that you become successful, and that is through having a network of relationships. That is part of what funnels cases to you, which in turn is how you establish your reputation, and if you're someone who is from a diverse background or a woman, you're not seeing as many faces that look like you and that have the same background as you. They're not in the same clubs or the same associations or the same context where some of these relationships and networks are built. So, I think that the relational context of long-term success in the law is critically important and I don't think that is something that we talk about that much. But clearly race, gender, and sexual orientation are all obstacles to being successful and in terms of building your professional network. And I think the WLI plays a role, at least for those people who are lucky enough to participate and can counteract that on some level. So, to pick up on the idea that you're here to save yourself, I think it's true. But I think the relationships that you build through an organization like the WLI can help you to take that next step to reach beyond your comfort zone.

Dainen: I think the program (and being on the board of Q-Law) has really increased my confidence, not only professionally but personally. I think the program for me, and I'm sure for some others, was a really big win. All of these amazing people, these diverse lawyers and judges, and people who have done really amazing things...all of them believe in you and want you to take part in this program because they think you are going to go and do similarly amazing things, too.

Beth: But no pressure! [Laughter.]

Dainen: Yes, no pressure! But that was a big part of it for me. In particular to what Beth was saying about relationship building, I had met judges in my hometown before, but it's really a different level to sit at lunch with a Supreme Court justice. Justice Owens came and sat with us at lunch on the first day. What are you supposed to say to a Supreme Court justice? We didn't even know, but we figured it out. 🙄

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