

President's Message

Lawyers Club meets with foreign lawyers in State Dept. program

By Catherine Kowalewski



I was honored to recently participate on behalf of Lawyers Club in the U.S. Department of State's International Visitor Leadership Program ("IVLP"). I, along with Lawyers Club vice presidents Amy Lepine, Cindy Freeland and Hayley Peterson, as well as past Lawyers Club president and current Advisory Board member Judge Patricia Cowett (Ret.), met with IVLP delegates to discuss the role of bar organizations in the U.S. judicial system.

The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs administers the IVLP. The program, established in 1940, serves as a cultural exchange designed to build mutual understanding between the United States and other countries. The IVLP annually brings 4,000 foreign nationals from all over the world to meet with their professional counterparts in the United States. The individuals who are selected are individuals who are recognized by the State Department as current or potential future policymakers in their home countries. Over the years, many of the distinguished individuals who have participated in the IVLP have gone on to become leaders in their countries, including heads of state.

A typical IVLP program lasts three weeks and includes stops in four U.S. cities. San Diego was one of those stops for the recent program on the U.S. judicial system. The seven delegates who participated in the program were all lawyers in their home countries, and each had an impressive resume. The delegates were from all over the world, including Portugal, Thailand and Rwanda.

Lawyers Club was asked to participate to discuss the role of bar organizations within the legal community. I was not really sure quite what to expect from the meeting. I was told to provide an overview of the legal services our organization provides to the community, but I was not sure whether the discussion would involve more of a general overview of how bar associations operate or whether it would be more specifically related to Lawyers Club.

The meeting turned out to be an incredible cultural learning experience for all involved. After a brief overview of our organization and what we do, the delegates began asking questions on a range of topics. Some of the questions related to more general topics on the U.S. legal system, whereas some of the questions revolved around Lawyers Club and our mission.

The delegates seemed to find it particularly interesting that Judge Cowett participated in the meeting, and it prompted the participants to ask about the process for becoming judges in this country. I learned from the delegates that in certain other countries, the track to becoming a judge is a separate track from becoming a lawyer. It was a foreign concept to all of them how the U.S. system allows for some judges to be elected. Even our appointment process seemed unusual given we do not have the separate tracks.

Judge Cowett's presence also intrigued the delegates as they found it interesting that lawyers and judges belong to the same organization. We explained to them how many current and retired judges and politi-

cians founded Lawyers Club. We further explained the many benefits of having both judges and lawyers working together to achieve our mission but also the rules that are in place to ensure that no conflicts are created by having lawyers and judges as members of the same organization.

Our discussion then turned to Lawyers Club's mission as we discussed why our organization was founded and the many ways in which our organization works towards achieving our goals. The

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participants discussed the status of women in their own legal communities. According to certain of the delegates, women in their countries appear to be in the same position as women in the United States. Women are going to law school in numbers equal to men, but women still seem to lag behind men in holding leadership positions.

I was particularly struck by the Cambodian delegate. The Cambodian woman asked us how she can convince the powers-that-be in her country that women should have an important and equal role to play in society. From listening to her speak about the current status of women in her country, it felt like she was starting at ground zero as women play a very small role within the legal community.

Each of the other Lawyers Club participants were equally struck by the Cambodian delegate's discussion of the status of women, and her question resonated with them. It seemed to us that women in Cambodia are in the same place women were here back in 1972 when our organization was founded.

"I, too, was struck by the woman from Cambodia," Freeland said. "We are the fortunate ones now to be standing on the shoulders of those who came before us so that we have the opportunity to see farther – whereas in Cambodia, they are the ones on whose shoulders future generations hopefully will stand."

Participating in the program was not only an incredible honor but also an incredible learning experience for me and the other Lawyers Club board members who participated.

"Participating in the meeting reaffirmed the importance of Lawyers Club to me and to the community as a whole," Peterson said. "There really is strength in numbers. Lawyers Club allows our voices to be heard. Creation of a similar organization in other countries, particularly developing countries, would be of great benefit to women struggling for equality and even just to be heard."