

## DIVERSITY ADVOCATES

# Little Mendelson P.C.

## Creating Opportunities for Diversity

BY META J. MEREDAY



**MICHELLE THOMAS**  
*Special Counsel and Diversity & Inclusion Council Co-Chair*



**DIONYSIA JOHNSON-MASSIE**  
*Equity Shareholder, Board Member and Co-Chair of the Diversity & Inclusion Council and Women's Leadership Initiative*

As the world's largest labor and employment law firm, representing management in the U.S. and internationally, Littler Mendelson, P.C. is also recognized as one of the leaders in promoting diversity and inclusion in the legal profession. Littler is not only committed to advancing fairness and equality, it has made these values an integral part of its business strategy, internal structure and client development.

For more than a decade, the firm has taken significant steps to recruit, retain and promote women and lawyers of color and has received industry recognition for its progressive efforts to foster an open and inclusive working environment. According to Dionysia Johnson-Massie, an Equity Shareholder, Board Member and Co-Chair of the Diversity & Inclusion Council and Women's Leadership Initiative, "Our results are based on hard work, a willingness to ask the tough questions and intentional action, not happenstance." Johnson-Massie further states that Littler "walks the walk all the way up the leadership ranks" with women currently comprising almost half of Littler's attorneys and a third of its shareholders. Lawyers of color account for 16 percent of the firm's attorneys, and persons of color and/or women making up one-third of the Management Committee and nearly one-third of its Board of Directors.

These measures have been made possible with the strong backing of the firm's leadership, including immediate past president and managing director, Marko Mrkonich, and the firm's current co-presidents and co-managing directors, Tom Bender and Jeremy Roth. A decade ago, the firm formed a Diversity and Inclusion Council, which is responsible for reviewing and implementing firm-wide strategies on diversity and inclusion. The firm's affinity groups serve as forums for mentoring, networking and business development, and Littler's Women's Leadership Initiative focuses on developing leadership skills and honing client development acumen.

Dionysia Johnson-Massie and Michelle Thomas have played prominent roles in the firm's continuing progress while also distinguishing themselves in their own practices. For almost 20

years, Dionysia has advised employers on employment matters and has litigated hundreds of employment disputes involving race, gender, age and other categories throughout the southeast. She is recognized as a national expert on employment litigation as well as diversity and inclusion strategies, often quoted in national publications and having written extensively on these subjects.

Michelle has spent the past 16 years of her practice focused solely on ERISA and employee benefits, one of the few African-American women lawyers with this expertise. She advises clients on designing, implementing and operating both retirement and health and welfare plans and assists employers in complying with tax and labor regulations. She is also the hiring attorney for the firm's Washington, D.C. office and co-chairs the Diversity and Inclusion Council.

Their accomplishments are all the more remarkable given the fact that lawyers of color account for 3 percent of all equity lawyers in majority law firms.

Both Dionysia and Michelle underscore the importance in the legal profession of understanding and appreciating those of diverse backgrounds, whether they are clients, witnesses, judges or juries. "Our clients have a valid expectation that the lawyers who represent them can truly understand their life experiences," Michelle said. "That understanding and appreciation of one's life experiences can be crucial for a trial lawyer," Dionysia said. "A litigation team with a strategy that takes into account how one's background can influence the reaction to a witness's testimony or legal arguments "is worth its weight in gold."

"At Littler, diversity and inclusion is a core firm value and business imperative that is woven into the fabric of our culture," said Co-Presidents and Co-Managing Directors Tom Bender and Jeremy Roth. "We continually strive to enhance and improve our already well-recognized focus on diversity because an open and inclusive environment is vital to our firm's ongoing success and role as a leader in our communities. Our clients, attorneys and staff demand nothing less." ■