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Representation Matters.

We've all heard the slogan, but do we really know what it means?

In the last year, at the height of what will probably be written in our history books as the world's largest protest for human equality, key phrases such as representation, diversity, and inclusion, have been floating around, not only in the social justice circuits, but among businesses and corporations as well. A simple Google search of the word "representation" opens the door for a plethora of definitions, such as "Representation matters because we all bring different perspectives to the table, and those perspectives are really informed by our experiences and our identities." (Salesforce.com) or "Representation matters because 'if she can see it, she can be it'…" (Edutopia.com).

> "Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and the test of our civilization."
>
> *--Mahatma Gandhi*

While these examples are exceptional explanations, it still begs the question of why representation matters, specifically in the legal arena.

According to the article "Diversity in Law: Who Cares?" shared by the American Bar Association, the legal profession has been "one of the least diverse professions in the nation." This means that with respect to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, and/or disability - the very components that have been at the core of our nation's most contentious and landmark cases – it is safe to assume that the individuals constructing and interpreting the laws have not always undertaken the challenges of those affected by them. Just imagine the multitude of outcomes, including not having to endure the fight for basic privileges, if the proper representation was accessible prior to *Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857 Ruling: the Constitution was not meant to include American citizenship for Americans of African descent/slaves); Plessy v. Ferguson (1896 Ruling: racial segregation did not violate the Constitution); Brown v. Board of Education (1954 Ruling: racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional); Loving v. Virginia (1967 Ruling: laws banning interracial marriage violated the Equal Protection Clauses); PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1971 Ruling: students with mental disabilities could receive a*

free public education); or *Obergefell v. Hodges (2015 Ruling: the fundamental right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples),* to name a few.

The need to feel a sense of belonging, empathy to one's plight, and to be understood, is a shared fabric of humanity, especially when dealing with laws that either protect or indirectly harm specific subgroups. Diversity in the legal field is "necessary to demonstrate that our laws are being made and administered for the benefits of all persons," as the need for "fair representation of citizens in the legal system is crucial and begins with a diverse population of attorneys and judges." – *American Bar Association.* Not only is there a continued need to eradicate covert and overt biases and discrimination in the legal system, but there are incomparable benefits of bringing legal professionals of different backgrounds and experiences together to create valuable outcomes and quality results for those they serve.

On a personal note, this past summer our firm had the pleasure of hosting several law students as summer clerks. Of all the bright and ambitious talent before us, I subconsciously took an exceptional interest in a quiet, young African-American clerk. In hindsight, I realize she reminded me so much of younger myself – shy, unsure, and never feeling as if I fit into the spaces that I shared interests in. I invited her to visit my office any time she needed to decompress from firm-life, and was glad that she accepted my offer. She shared that her whole life had existed in all-white spaces, from grade school to law school, and that she never felt comfortable enough to confide in her colleagues when those spaces felt suffocating, for fear of being mistreated or stereotyped. As an African-American woman who grew up in a time before the Kamala Harrises of the world graced our smart phone alerts, and whose only image of a black woman attorney was the fictional Claire Huxtable, I was all too familiar with her experiences and the challenges that our environments could impose at times. I was proud to serve as a safe space for this young woman who looked like me, for whatever it was worth. By the end of the summer, we had grown quite fond of each other and on her last day with our firm, she left a note on my desk which said "thank you for making me feel so understood and seen throughout my time here. I hope you continue to make space and advocate for future lawyers that look like us." I saw her, but most importantly, she felt seen. And that, in a nutshell, is why representation matters.