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March 25, 2015

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Freedom Rider Hank Thomas Participates in LSBA's Conclave on Diversity in the Legal Profession

NEW ORLEANS—Freedom Rider Henry “Hank” James Thomas was a speaker and special guest during the March 6 Louisiana State Bar Association’s (LSBA) eighth annual Conclave on Diversity in the Legal Profession. Titled “Celebrating 50 Years of Civil Rights: Moving the Pendulum Forward,” the Conclave was co-hosted by the Louisiana Supreme Court and local and specialty bar associations from across Louisiana.

Thomas, who was jailed in Mississippi’s notorious Parchman State Prison Farm for his activities in the 1961 Freedom Rides, is best known as an American civil rights activist and one of the original 13 Freedom Riders, men and women who bravely boarded the first Greyhound bus that traveled South in 1961 to protest the segregation of buses and trains. In addressing Conclave participants, his words — “We’ve made progress, but there is much more to be done” — were met with a standing ovation.

The Freedom Rider Exhibit, a traveling exhibition by the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History, in partnership with American Experience and funded through the National Endowment for Humanities, was a special feature of this year’s Conclave. The 60-foot-long exhibit documents the Freedom Rides from May through November of 1961. The exhibit is currently on display through March 27 at the Louisiana Bar Center, 601 St. Charles Ave., New Orleans.

Each year, the LSBA — through the sponsorship of law firms and attorneys’ groups — hosts the Conclave on Diversity in the Legal Profession. The Conclave’s purpose is to encourage discussion among judges and attorneys, primarily hiring and managing attorneys within law firms and law departments, about the importance of diversity within the legal profession and how to improve diversity within the profession in Louisiana. This year, attorneys, judges and community activists came together at the New Orleans Marriott to discuss the progress of the civil rights movement and the changes that still need to be made.

Another Conclave highlight was the interactive session facilitated by Judge Wendell L. Griffen, titled “Inclusion 8.” Judge Griffen incorporated an exercise called the Privilege Walk, which served as a moving and dramatic way of confronting participants about the myth of meritocracy.

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Other topics of this year's Conclave included "The Changing Landscape and Effects of Marriage Equality;" "Navigating the Troubled Waters of Immigration;" a civil rights discussion titled "Just How Far Has the Pendulum Moved? Striving for Justice;" and a provocative discussion of the current criminal law system, "Moving the Pendulum to Justice, Fairness and Accountability."

Keynote speaker Kim M. Keenan, CEO and president of Multicultural Media, Telecom and Internet Council, was introduced by Louisiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Bernette Joshua Johnson. Keenan spoke passionately about minorities and the historical impact of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, their effect on communities then and now, and discussed the awakening of communities through social media.

"The eighth annual Conclave on Diversity in the Legal Profession was a great success," said LSBA President Joseph L. "Larry" Shea, Jr. "It was a truly diverse group of registrants who were provided with information and insight into the numerous issues we face in Louisiana with an increasingly diverse population of lawyers."

The ninth annual Conclave on Diversity in the Legal Profession will be held at the Hilton Baton Rouge Capitol Center on Friday, March 4, 2016.

The Louisiana State Bar Association assists its more than 21,000 members in the practice of law. The statewide association, as part of its multi-faceted mission, promotes and maintains access to justice initiatives for the state's residents, assists the Louisiana Supreme Court in its regulation of the practice of law, upholds the honor of the courts and the profession, and supports programs that increase public understanding of and respect for the law.

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