

DIVERSITY NEWS

December 2007

Yvonne: In previous editions of Diversity News, we've talked about how diversity management differs from equal employment opportunity and affirmative action.

Thomas: We've also talked about the characteristics of a model EEO program and about expert-identified leading practices for diversity management.

And in those discussions, we identified several ways in which model EEO programs and diversity management best practices are similar:

The importance of top leadership commitment,

The integration of the programs into the agency's strategic plan,

And program and management accountability.

Yvonne: Which is why we are devoting this special edition of Diversity News to the remarks delivered by Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Gordon Mansfield, at the Secretary's 17th Annual EEO Awards ceremony, held on November 15, 2007.

Thomas: Remarks in which Acting Secretary Mansfield describes the value of diversity and the importance of equal opportunity. Enjoy!

Mansfield: Thank you, Paul, and thank you all very much. Thank you. This is an important event. When we talk about "the land of the free" and "the home of the brave" in one instance. When we talk about a department dedicated to taking care of veterans, the veterans from that "land of the free"—and they define who the brave in that "home of the brave" are.

I think it's important that we recognize that equal employment opportunity has to be, has to be, the cornerstone of our employment program. These awards represent our department's highest recognition of contributions to the goals of equal employment opportunity. Put another way, the achievements of our—one, two, three, four, five—awardees cut to the heart of that uniquely American idea of inclusiveness. So I want to personally recognize each one of you and extend a very warm central office welcome to your families and friends and coworkers with us today.

The winners are: Ms. Tammie Kierstead from Oklahoma City Medical Center. From Coatesville, Pennsylvania, Sandra Simmons, who I believe is perhaps the fifth awardee. Right. On the way. Ms. Sande Jones from the Waco, Texas, Regional Office. Pamela McKinney, another Oklahoma City VA Medical Center

program manager. And Ms. Tristen Wendland, a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor at the Denver VA Regional Office.

All of these folks, all of the folks, are out there delivering or helping deliver service to the veterans that we're here to serve and, in so doing, they're also working with their fellow employees in recognizing that to have the best workforce possible we need to ensure that these equal opportunities are recognized and applied. Not just recognized, but applied. So I want to thank all of you for the exceptional work that you've done and offer my congratulations to each of you.

This ceremony celebrates an American principle that is inviolate: equality, equal opportunity, equal rights for all and special privileges for none. It is a cornerstone of our country's founding philosophy and a keystone of our great democratic experiment of 1776. All men are created equal. A pretty straightforward, straightforward statement. No ambiguity in that. Those five words dictate that every citizen should be viewed in terms of the content of his or her character and that opportunities should be made available to every citizen based on ability. That phrase reaches to the very heart of what it means to be an American. But there is also the reality that American history, in many ways, is the history of the struggle for equality by African Americans, most certainly, but also by women, the disabled, Native Americans, Jews and Catholics, Hispanics, and Asian Americans, and by the successive waves of immigrants that came to our shores.

Today our Nation is becoming even more diverse as we become, as we welcome, more and more new Americans. Some of you may remember, right here in this room not too long ago, we observed a ceremony where 40 individuals were sworn in as new citizens. So we are truly the world's, the world's only nation of nations. America as a country—and VA as an institution—have a continuing mandate to transform our core principles, our ideals, and our values into actual practice and to perfect the union that our founders created. And for us, that means respecting our individual differences, our individual differences, harnessing our collective, collective talent and energy, and leveraging the great power of diversity among our more than 247,000 employees.

It is particularly important that we as a department, established solely to serve veterans, set an example (as I mentioned). Why should that be? Because veterans place their lives at risk and all too often died or were injured to protect the principles of equal opportunity. Like America itself, veterans come from every culture and every background imaginable. They worship at every conceivable faith; they are both women and men; and, as I mentioned, many were disabled in the service of our country. Quite simply, veterans have made equal opportunity possible and their sacrifice sustained a way of life that allows that principle to thrive more than two-and-a-quarter centuries after we first established our great social and political experiment in freedom, in justice, and in equality.

The exceptional work of the five employees that we recognize today ensures that our department will not fall short in our obligation to honor the basic human dignity of our employees and of the veterans that we serve. Their wide-ranging contributions within the realm of EEO ensure that VA's efforts in outreach, in recruitment, in hiring, in training and development, in ADR, as well as in supportive work environments and healthy community partnerships all build, all build upon that enduring legacy held in the familiar words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident."

So I want to conclude this afternoon by sharing with you part of an address that President Kennedy gave to the Massachusetts State Legislature when he left the Bay State in 1961 to come to Washington. He was talking about public service when he offered these thoughts, and I would quote: "We must always consider... that we shall be as a city upon a hill—the eyes of all people are upon us." And our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, state, and local, must be as a city upon a hill, constructed and inhabited by men (and women), aware of their grave trust and great responsibilities. Aware of their grave trust and great responsibilities.

The employees we honor here have answered the noble call to public service and accepted, with great purpose, their even greater trust and responsibility. So for their colleagues, and the veterans we serve, they are constructing our own VA city upon a hill, strong and solid programs and services that rest securely on the bedrock of equality. We are grateful for your service, and on behalf of the Department of Veterans Affairs I want to thank you and congratulate each one of you for a job well done. Thank you very much.

Yvonne: That was great, wasn't it?

Thomas: Indeed.

You can find more information on the Secretary's Annual EEO Awards Program, including descriptions and pictures of this year's winners, on the DM&EEO Web site at the address shown below.

Yvonne: But we're just about out of time for this edition of Diversity News. We certainly appreciate your watching, and we hope you'll tune in again next month.

Before we go, we'd like to show a few clips from this year's EEO awards ceremony, with Acting Secretary Mansfield and General Counsel Paul Hutter presenting the awards to this year's winners.

Thomas: We've added an audio clip taken from President Kennedy's "City Upon a Hill" speech, which Secretary Mansfield referenced in his remarks. We hope you like it.

Thanks for watching! And...

Both: Have a great month!

Kennedy: For of those to whom much is given, much is required. And when at some future date the high court of history sits in judgment on each one of us—recording whether in our brief span of service we fulfilled our responsibilities to the state—our success or failure, in whatever office we may hold, will be measured by the answers to four questions:

First, were we truly men of courage—with the courage to stand up to one's enemies—and the courage to stand up, when necessary, to one's own associates—the courage to resist public pressure, as well as private greed?

Secondly, were we truly men of judgment—with perceptive judgment of the future as well as of the past—of our own mistakes as well as the mistakes of others—with enough wisdom to know what we did not know, and enough candor to admit it?

Third, were we truly men of integrity—men who never ran out on either the principles in which they believed or the people who believed in them—men whom neither financial gain nor political ambition could ever divert from the fulfillment of our sacred trust?

Finally, were we truly men of dedication—with an honor mortgaged to no single individual or group, and compromised by no private obligation or aim, but devoted solely to serving the public good and the national interest?