



A major race riot raged in the poor, mostly black community of Overtown, just 20 blocks to the north, the night John W. Kozyak, JD '75, and his partners moved into their new Miami, Florida, law office in 1982. The event helped spur his professional commitment to diversity.



**FORMER ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO** with participants at the Minority Mentoring Picnic

**“A lot of people talk about diversity, but John has really put hard work behind his passion.”** DETRA SHAW-WILDER

**J**OHN KOZYAK IS NO STRANGER TO RACIAL INJUSTICE. He grew up in Granite City, Illinois, in the 1950s and 1960s, a time when both de facto and de jure segregation were more the rule than the exception in the greater St. Louis area.

“When you’re a kid, there’s not a lot you can do about something like that, though it was clear to me that it was wrong,” Kozyak says. “But seeing the 1982 riot in Overtown motivated me. I realized that I was now in a position to do something about it.”

He and his partners quickly committed their commercial litigation firm of Kozyak Tropin & Throckmorton PA (KT&T) to becoming a national leader in recruiting and developing talented minority lawyers. The firm established a \$20,000 scholarship for minority students and started seeking out female, Hispanic, and African-American lawyers. But the firm’s most dynamic and influential project was reviving a mentoring program for black law students at the University of Miami. In addition to providing financial aid and mentoring, the Miami program encourages African-American law students to live and work in the metropolitan area after graduation.

“Miami didn’t have much of a black middle class. It was difficult for African-American lawyers to feel at home,” says Kozyak. “We wanted to create a place for them to be comfortable and make connections so that they would stay in Miami.”

Looking back about 20 years, Kozyak remembers that the University of Miami’s program to match black students with lawyers was struggling. Laurel Isicoff, now the first female judge on the United States Bankruptcy Court, Southern District of Florida, was one of the mentors in the program.

“John decided to kick-start the program,” she says, “and once John gets committed to something, you either get on the train or get out of the way.”

Throughout her 14-year tenure as an attorney and shareholder of KT&T, Isicoff mentored students, fulfilling a commitment to diversity “that had always been a part of my life.”

The mentoring program, which has expanded to all law schools in Florida, is named after Kozyak at the University of Miami and at St. Thomas University. Today more than 300 alumni attest to the program’s success.

One of them is Nathalie Cadet-James. A litigator with the Miami firm of Kenny Nachwalter PA and a KT&T scholarship recipient, she is currently mentoring two students.

“Having John as a mentor is truly a blessing. He just took me under his wing and opened so many doors for me,” she says. “I’ve learned a lot from him, both on a professional level and personal level. Because of these experiences, I am a better person, and hopefully, like John, a good mentor to those in my community.”

Coral Lopez-Castro still considers Kozyak her mentor after 17 years. Now a partner at KT&T and president of the Cuban American Bar Association, she admires his commitment.

“If he has a mentee looking for a job in Atlanta, he’ll open his Rolodex and call every person he knows in Atlanta and get him or her interviews,” Lopez-Castro says. “In this life, that’s all you want—someone to open the door. That’s what John does. He changes lives.”

Detra Shaw-Wilder, now a partner at KT&T, credits Kozyak’s support with her success in the community and in her profession. She played a key role in organizing Miami’s second annual Minority Mentoring Picnic—the best example of the mentoring program’s emphasis on developing social and professional contacts.

A recent picnic combined succulent roast pigs, steaming pots of paella, a jambalaya of music, and approximately 1,000 attendees, including influential lawyers and judges along with some 300 students seeking mentors.

Kimberly Norwood, professor of law at Washington University, was among the participants. She recalls: “The picnic was not just fun, but incredibly organized. John worked the crowd to make sure people were talking and connecting. Even the deejay would periodically remind people to circulate, connect, and exchange information. It was just a wonderful event.”

About two years ago, Kozyak was the impetus for a similar mentoring program in St. Louis. With the assistance of Washington University law professors Norwood and David Becker, an alumni management panel established a mentoring program for African-American law students. The panel members implementing the program are Glenn Dalton, JD ’77; Thomas Lowther, JD ’62; Joan Newman, JD ’72; Hope Whitehead, JD ’90; and Ebony Woods, JD ’03.

Thus far about 30 Washington University students have participated, and the panel is targeting about 20 more students. Kozyak recently flew to St. Louis to speak to the mentees and mentors, the latter of which are drawn from St. Louis area lawyers and judges.

Over the years, Kozyak and/or his firm have received numerous awards for his commitment to diversity and advancement in the legal profession, including a Washington University School of Law Distinguished Alumni Award and two diversity awards from the Florida Bar—the G. Kirk Haas Award and an award from the Young Lawyers Division.

Meanwhile, Kozyak says his greatest satisfaction comes from seeing attitudes toward diversity in his profession come full circle. “We used to hear lawyers say, ‘I’d hire minorities if I could find qualified ones.’ Now those same lawyers are trying to sell their firms as good places for minorities to work. It’s gratifying to have been involved in turning that around.” ■■■