

National Conference of Judges to be Held in the Equality State

For nearly 150 years, Wyoming has been known as the “Equality State.” On June 25-27, 2014, the Equality State will welcome more than 200 judges, lawyers and scholars from around the country. They will convene for the 26th Annual Meeting of the National Consortium on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts, hosted by the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation (HMWF).

This is the first time the Conference will take place in the Rocky Mountain West, which National Consortium leaders hope will give out-of-state attendees a more nuanced understanding of the region. Gregory Conyers is the Director of Diversity of the State Bar of Michigan and a member of the National Consortium Board of Directors. He says, “We think it’s a unique opportunity for us to take a look at how these important issues regarding equity and fairness for everyone are addressed around the country, particularly areas of the country that we have not heretofore had as much engagement with as an organization.”

Notably, Wyoming has a much smaller racial and ethnic minority population than many states. In 2012, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that only 15 percent of the population of Wyoming falls into this category. In the country as a whole, that segment of the population is around 37 percent.

“To be a member of a minority group in Wyoming is a more isolating experience than in California or New York or Florida,” says Eric Muller, program co-chair. He is a member of the HMWF board of directors and a Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He taught at the University of Wyoming College of Law for four years. “I think the Wyoming legal community recognizes that this presents certain unique challenges for members of those groups. This, in a sense, heightens the vigilance that the Wyoming legal community ought to have in ensuring that it is both understanding and meeting the needs of all litigants.”

The Conference hopes to engage lawyers and will provide continuing legal education credit. Walter Eggers is a partner at Holland & Hart’s Cheyenne office and does pro bono work for the HMWF. He says, “I think all communities, including Wyoming, face issues of racial and ethnic equality in the legal system to some degree. I believe it is an important issue here in Wyoming whether you’re talking about the federal or state court systems, or the tribal court system.”

The program will feature locally relevant topics such as the relationship between tribal and state courts, as well as topics that

resonate nationally, like the rights of juveniles, lower-income communities, and documented immigrants. Speakers hailing from the University of Wyoming College of Law include Professor Diane E. Courselle and Interim Dean Jacquelyn Bridgeman. For the first time, the National Consortium will offer training on strategies for identifying and correcting with implicit bias.

“It’s an opportunity for the members of the judiciary to educate themselves on those issues and to hear from other members of the judiciary from outside of Wyoming about their concerns and how they’re dealing with those issues,” says Judge Steven Cranfill, Fifth Judicial District Judge in Wyoming.

One of the main draws for the National Consortium was the proximity of a Japanese American confinement site, Conyers says.

The Heart Mountain Interpretive Center was built on the site where nearly 14,000 people of Japanese ancestry were incarcerated during World War II. Two thirds of those forcibly relocated to Wyoming were American citizens and no Heart Mountain internees ever received a trial.

“What happened at Heart Mountain wasn’t just an historical anomaly. Institutionalized discrimination is not something that we have fully eliminated in our country,” says

Aura Newlin, Program Co-Chair and HMWF Board Member. She is descended from Heart Mountain internees and a native Wyomingite. “It’s still an issue that we struggle with as a nation: How do we ensure that this never happens again?”

Wyoming Senator Alan K. Simpson and childhood friend Norman Mineta, former Heart Mountain internee and U.S. Secretary of Commerce and of Transportation, will give a keynote address on Thursday. On Friday, Judge Lance Ito, who presided over the O. J. Simpson trial and is the son of two Heart Mountain internees, will speak. Muller will give tours of the Interpretive Center and seminars on legal dilemmas associated with the mass confinement of Japanese Americans.

“I think it just makes you consider: are we really the equality state or is that just a name?” says Judge Cranfill. “And it’s an opportunity to stop and reflect on ourselves and how we’re doing business here.”

Learn more about the Conference and register to attend June 25-27, 2014 in Cody, Wyoming, at www.heartmountain.org/national-consortium.html.

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~ Hon. Steven Cranfill