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How this Greenberg Traurig lawyer overcame systemic racism in his career

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Jéan Wilson is one of Central Florida's most powerful attorneys, but it wasn't easy breaking into the industry in the 1980s.

At the time, there were not a lot of Black real estate leaders in the Orlando area, so it was challenging to build a big practice. As a result, after 10 years, he switched to public finance and infrastructure development practice, which he said provided better opportunities for minorities and allowed him to grow his law career.

Wilson – now co-managing shareholder of the Orlando office of Greenberg Traurig LLP – knows more work needs to be done to promote inclusivity in the legal profession. “Our industry must be committed to change management principles as there will most definitely be a natural resistance to changing the standard processes which law firms have been using.”

Here, he spoke with Orlando Business Journal about promoting diversity at law firms, overcoming personal challenges and his thoughts on the future of inclusivity in the industry:

What does your industry need to do to help more Black-owned businesses succeed? One of the most powerful tools available to companies is the procurement process. Law firms and businesses should consider implementing an infrastructure that allows minority suppliers an opportunity to be a part of the firm's success. Greenberg Traurig's procurement programs and decisions



Jéan Wilson is co-managing shareholder of Greenberg Traurig LLP in Orlando.

strive to promote diversity and inclusion of traditionally disenfranchised populations. We actively support the development and growth of minority, women, LGBTQ, veteran and service-disabled veteran businesses.

What's your company strategy to increase the number of minorities, especially Black people, in leadership positions? Greenberg Traurig consistently has focused on recruiting, developing, retaining and promoting diverse talent. Most recently we put in place a dynamic initiative focused on our Black lawyers to further position them for greater success on our unique platform. While the initiative is in its nascent stages, we believe it will serve as a blueprint for increasing not only diversity, which is about the numbers, but also equity, inclusion and justice for Black lawyers and all lawyers of color.

What advice would you give other businesses that want to address systemic racism in the workplace? Systemic racism is the foundational challenge most businesses

face because it's invisible to most within the institution, but it negatively impacts the prospects for the institution to take full advantage of the talents and opportunities offered by the diverse team members. Diversity needs to come from the top. It needs to be an action, rather than simply a policy. There must be focus and awareness throughout the organization, particularly at the middle management level.

Why is inclusivity even more important now? Given the events of 2020, and the challenges that continue in 2021, this is more important than ever. Inclusivity helps make us whole. It's the right thing to do.

Were you, or someone you know, ever a victim of systemic racism? You can't be a 61-year-old Black man living in America and not feel the wrath of systemic racism. I have faced such experiences throughout my life: in high school, college, law school and as one of the first Black lawyers at a major law firm in Orlando. Some of these experiences also have included many unfortunate interactions with police. Over the years, I have learned that the key to overcoming these experiences is to use them as fuel to power my determination to succeed.

How can the industry promote more diversity in leadership positions? It all starts on the front end by aggressively recruiting diverse talent. The next step involves the active implementation of training and development programs designed to positively address and overcome the unique barriers and challenges faced by diverse professionals. Ultimately, there must be a commitment to promote those diverse professionals who are able to deliver value for the organization.