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As director of diversity and professional development at Perkins Coie, Theresa Cropper (seated) has reunited with many of her former students from her tenure at Northwestern University School of Law, including (from left to right) associate Cynthia Peterson, partner Joseph McCoy, internal communications manager Karen Clanton, and associate Todd Church.

A 'soldier' armed with love

By Maria Kantzavelos

To get to the heart of her philosophy on diversity, and the approach law firms should take toward that effort, Theresa Cropper turns to a metaphor illustrated by law professors Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres in their 2002 book, "The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy."

The metaphor is centered on the early days of coal mining, when miners carried bright

yellow canaries alongside them into the underground. The birds, because of a more fragile respiratory system, served as an early warning signal to miners of the presence of dangerous levels of gases in the atmosphere.

"They're working away and the canary is just whistling away and when the canary stops whistling and singing, and it starts sputtering, then that means the environment is soon to be toxic for everybody. It's time to get

out. Get the birdie out, get everybody out, because it ain't happening," Cropper said recently from her Chicago office at Perkins Coie, where she serves as the Seattle-based law firm's director of diversity and professional development.

When it comes to her approach to addressing diversity in any institution, Cropper pointed out, "The different person is the canary."

"The canary is not sick, nothing is wrong

Networking > feature

with that canary. Something is wrong with the system,” she said. “Something is wrong with the environment, and it’s going to be toxic for everybody soon. If you don’t calibrate your community for the canary, and keep the canary singing, then everybody is not going to make it.”

What that means, Cropper said, is that the institution should find systemic solutions, ways to create an environment where everyone — not only minorities — can thrive.

“The different person is really the signal for whether your environment is toxic. If you have different people in your environment and they’re not doing well, the approach should never be that there is something wrong with the person,” Cropper said. “It should be: What’s wrong with the system? As long as the canary is singing, it’s fine. The minute it’s not singing is when it’s going to be wrong for everybody.”

Cropper, 54, has been in the business of diversity in the field of law for nearly 20 years, starting long before firms began to professionalize the notion by creating administrative positions that aim to manage the recruitment, retention, and advancement of lawyers who have traditionally been underrepresented in the profession.

In October 2007 she became Perkins Coie’s first director of diversity and professional development, after serving for three years as national director of diversity at DLA Piper.

She views her job as promoting an environment that “values, appreciates, respects, and encourages differences.”

At Perkins Coie, Cropper is responsible for managing the firm’s diversity initiatives, policies, and recruitment efforts, as well as its professional development initiatives and firm-wide programs designed to support the advancement of all attorneys.

She serves as a resource, she said, working closely with the firm’s offices, practice groups, and committees on furthering strategies for recruiting and retaining diverse attorneys and tracking that progress, and for promoting the concept of diversity as being part of the firm culture.

“I tell my partners, ‘Look — I need you to wear our diversity on your sleeve, every day. And then one day it’ll become your arm, and

then one day it’ll become you. But you’ve got to wear it, that’s the first step,” Cropper said.

While Perkins Coie already had a diversity committee of practicing lawyers, charged with tending to firm-wide strategies to recruit, retain, and promote women and attorneys of minority race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, firm leaders wanted to further the initiative by committing a full-time position to manage the task, said Robert Giles, firm-wide managing partner.

Giles said law firm leaders searched for a year to find the right person for the job.

“When we met Theresa it was like: Wow — here’s someone who has been there, done this. And we also felt she’d fit into our culture,” Giles said. “Theresa’s personality is infectious when it comes to ideas and things to do. She believes in what she’s speaking to you about. She is just so committed, and 100 percent behind what she expresses, that it just gets everybody else much more committed on their own part.”

Student affairs

When Cropper steps out into the wider legal community — whether she is speaking at conferences or attending special events — she’s bound to run into a few of her “babies,” as she likes to call them.

Those “babies,” whom a spirited Cropper tends to greet with hearty hugs, could be grown-up partners in law firms who were once students at Northwestern University School of Law, where Cropper played a significant role for 14 years.

Her tenure there started in 1990, when she became the school’s first director of minority affairs, culminating in 2004 as associate dean for student affairs and dean of students.

“I really have always seen myself as a king-and-queen-maker,” Cropper said, referring to her role in guiding students from all sorts of backgrounds through law school and into careers across the country and the globe. “I just felt like I could be successful vicariously.”

Cropper, a single mother of two sons ages 19 and 16 who spent much of their childhood in the law school setting, was instrumental in bolstering the representation of minority law students at Northwestern, where 36.1 percent

of its student body is comprised of minorities, making it the most racially and ethnically diverse law school in Illinois, according to the 2008 *Chicago Lawyer Diversity Survey*.

She arrived at Northwestern armed with a law degree from American University, Washington College of Law, and experience working with Operation PUSH, as an administrative assistant to Jesse Jackson, and with music legend Stevie Wonder on numerous projects, including the campaign in the early 1980s to establish a national holiday honoring Martin Luther King, Jr.

When she stepped into the school’s newly created position of director of minority affairs — a position that existed then in just a few of the nation’s law schools — Cropper’s main objective was to increase the number of minority students at the law school and to foster an environment that would support their success in the JD program and beyond.

“I wanted to go find them, keep them, make sure they graduated and make sure they stayed connected as alumni,” Cropper said. “You created a community where people were going to be encouraged to thrive.”

That meant more targeted recruitment efforts and a say in the admissions process; finding ways to get minority students engaged in the law school once they arrived, like encouraging their participation in moot court, law review, and student government; working with student organizations in developing their programs and strategies; and counseling individual students on everything from the right courses to take and how to study, to career choices and landing the right job, and how to develop professionally beyond the hard skills of law, like understanding networking, how to present themselves and how to “work a room.”

“For me, hunger is a proxy for success,” Cropper said, offering some insight into her approach to the recruitment and admissions process. “The person that doesn’t have it, parents didn’t go to college, where success is the only option. They’re going to come in engaged because they really want to do what it takes to be successful. You’ve got to figure out who is going to be the best for us.”

When she started at Northwestern in 1990,

minority students accounted for only about 8 percent of the school's student population. By the end of Cropper's tenure there, diversity at the law school hovered around 30 percent.

And as diversity at the law school rose, Cropper pointed out, so did the school's admissions standards and its national rankings.

"Conventional wisdom says that's a contradiction in terms — that if you have diversity, somehow it's going to lower your standards. They say, somehow, you've got to play with the standards to get diverse," Cropper said. "That's not the reality. Diversity makes you better. By definition, it does."

While her initial mission was to service minority students, Cropper's role quickly evolved into one that would support the entire student body.

"It evolved as she made it evolve," said Leonard Rubinowitz, a Northwestern law professor who helped hire Cropper. "Her reputation was such that students wanted to get to know her and wanted her advice, and that crossed racial and ethnic barriers.

"She's a small person with a large personality. People who meet her remember her, and people who have some reason to know her will get to know her quickly."

Cropper's office at the law school — where students would not only come for advice about school and careers, and counseling on all sorts of life issues, but also just to chat — "was always this hodgepodge. You'd have all these collections of folks, and by definition you had to come in and wiggle your way in and just be part of the collection."

That collection, she said, included African-Americans and Hispanics, Asian-Americans, and gay and lesbian students. But it also included the white woman whose dad was a truck driver, the mothers or pregnant students, people with disabilities, older students, and the white men who entered law school expecting diversity.

"My thinking was 'minority' was self-defining. I had my traditional babies, who were clearly underrepresented in the profession, but if for any reason you felt like you were a minority, you come on in here and I'd give you some love," Cropper said.

She also knew when to give "tough love."

"I used to tell students, 'You'll either be a lawyer or a lawyer joke, one or the other, there's no middle ground here.' And that was my big ethics/honor code meeting," Cropper said. "And it's really that simple. 'You will do behavior that is honorable, that we respect, that lifts the profession up. Or, you'll do something that will be fodder for a joke years later — period. This is your reputation. You are coming into our profession. Make it better. And make us proud.'"

David E. Van Zandt, dean of the law school, said Cropper played a significant role in helping to change not only the demographics of the school but, more importantly, its culture.

In 1998, Van Zandt promoted Cropper to the position of assistant dean for student affairs, and in 2001, she became a key member of the school's management committee as associate dean for student affairs and dean of students.

"I thought her talents could be applied across the board," Van Zandt said. "We were on the same page in terms of where we wanted the school to go. We really tried, here, to change the student culture dramatically. She was the key person in doing that, moving away from a dependency culture to one where the students take a lot of initiative and responsibility. They're the real leaders."

A 'soldier' in The Movement

Cropper, whose grandmother was born in Coffeetown, Miss., and migrated to Chicago, where she raised a family and worked in a job sewing mailbags for the U.S. Postal Service, said she was taught from a young age that she is "from Chicago, second-generation North."

"For a long time, we kept getting the *Coffeetown Courier*. And there was this section called the 'Colored News.' When my cousin got married, she was in the *Colored News* and we just had such a hoot about that," Cropper said. "For us, it was a big joke. It was like, 'Oh — let's see what's happening in the *Colored News*.' But you knew there was that connection, that we had migrated for a better opportunity."

As a girl, Cropper said, she lived "episodically" in public housing projects of the Chicago Housing Authority until her "matri-

archal" family — including her grandmother, mother, aunts, siblings, and cousins — settled into the house her grandmother purchased on a dead-end street in the city's South Side.

She said she grew up learning the stories of her ancestors, like her grandmother's aunts who were traveling teachers on horseback, educating fellow black children because "black people had to educate their own at that time," and how the women struck a deal with a missionary family in Washington, D.C. The family needed help with housekeeping and caring for the children. Cropper's grandmother, then a young woman, would work for the family and, in exchange, she could attend a nearby school comprised then of all-white males.

"She had to sit in the back of the room, and she could only speak if no one else had the answer," Cropper said. "Her thing was, you always had to know a joke or a poem. Because you never knew when you were going to be called upon to say something. And you had to say something; you couldn't lose that opportunity."

Implicit in her grandmother's stories, Cropper said, "was that we never, ever internalized that white people were smarter than us — nor did we ever really get it that other black people just assumed that white people were smarter than them — and that we always should seek an opportunity to express ourselves.

"It was interesting to have that kind of history that was very strong and very important," Cropper said. "But we also had this political sense of where we were, in terms of race, and where the country was. It was an interesting kind of contradiction, because we understood where we were, but we never felt suppressed. My grandmother always said, 'Think yourself above it.'"

Cropper, who was old enough to remember when her mother marched with King from Selma to Montgomery, Ala. — and how her grandmother had to send bail money for her release from jail after the march — likes to say she was raised to be a "soldier in the Civil Rights Movement."

"You were raised to fight for things that you may never see," Cropper said. "This generation doesn't know about that. This is a gener-

Networking > feature

ation that saw Nelson Mandela walk out of prison. They saw the Berlin Wall go down. They saw the fall of Communist Russia. And they didn't see the carnage that led up to that, the lives that were lost.

"We worked on Free South Africa, and I never thought I'd see Nelson Mandela come out of that prison — ever. But you fought for his freedom," Cropper said. "That's what I was raised to do: To get in, keep the door open, push it a little wider, let everybody in, help them out, push them on, get them to keep the door open. ..."

Cropper's late mother, Joan Jeter Slay, a community organizer who pushed for Chicago Public School reform, was one of the architects behind the creation of local school councils.

For Cropper, who served on the local school council of her son's elementary school, law school was a means of following through with the emphasis on public service instilled in her from a young age.

"I grew up looking at how laws changed our lives," Cropper said. "To me, if you were going to be a change agent, then law was a good tool to be in your tool kit."

Cropper was born in 1954, the year of the historic challenge to school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*, she pointed out.

She was in law school during the 1978 landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision on affirmative action in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*.

While in law school, Cropper served as the first woman president of the National Black Law Students Association. After graduation, she worked for a brief stint as membership director for the Washington, D.C.-based National Bar Association, until she accepted an offer to return to Chicago and work for Operation PUSH.

That was also around the time when Cropper met Stevie Wonder, at an Operation PUSH gospel concert.

The two became "gossip buddies," she said, and the musician and social activist asked her to work with him in Washington, D.C., where he had been spearheading an effort that resulted in the federal holiday honoring King.

"Stevie saw it as an imperative," Cropper said,

referring to legislation authorizing the holiday, which went through numerous attempts at gaining congressional support before the bill was ultimately signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1983. "For a nation of differences this holiday says we all have the same dreams, and here is someone who reminded us of that.

"We did a massive PR campaign, as well as targeting who didn't vote for it, why they didn't vote for it. We did a huge petition drive," Cropper said. "We underestimated the power of celebrity, but it came on the House floor and it passed, which was just unbelievable. And for the first time ever it moved to the Senate side. Senator [Edward] Kennedy was the sponsor of the legislation and it passed. Reagan, who was saying he would never sign it, signed it."

Cropper, who has known Wonder for 27 years, said she still works for him as a consultant, serving as a liaison between Creative Artists Agency — one of Hollywood's top talent agencies — and Wonder's management.

"He's a national treasure. Whatever I can do to help him, I will do it," Cropper said. "He is as friendly and as loving as you think he is from listening to his music. He's a sensitive, kind soul. He's quick to cry about tragedy. He has an outrageous sense of humor. He's very playful. ... He's a really brilliant man, beyond his music."

Reunions

At Perkins Coie, Cropper has reunited with many of her "babies" from her Northwestern years. Take Joseph McCoy, a 1998 Northwestern law graduate who joined the firm in May as a partner in its real estate group.

"He grabbed me from his [law school] application from day one," Cropper said. "Here's a black kid who's captain of the football team at University of Chicago, and I'm thinking, 'This kid can do anything. If he can be captain of the football team and perform successfully enough where we're considering him for Northwestern, this is a star.'"

During his years in law school, McCoy said, Cropper was "a mentor, and almost like a second mother to me, in terms of being a resource and looking out for me and providing sound advice — and making sure I stayed

on track."

Cropper was quick to offer the backstory on how her former student, years later, landed at Perkins Coie, from the law firm Schwartz Cooper.

"One of our clients said, 'You know, the other half of the business that we give you is with this guy over here at this firm, you might want to check him out.' They [the firm] didn't know he was African-American," Cropper said. "That's the ultimate beauty. Here's this kid, who was one of my babies, who is now coming over here as a partner. It's where we should be — color was the added value. ... It's like, 'Well, thank God he's an African-American, but that was not the attraction.' The attraction was that he had the client's other half of the business. ... And it's a triple win for us. We got the business in the door, we got an African-American partner — it's a beautiful thing."

Steven Washington, a former Mayer Brown partner who serves as chief of staff to the Chicago Board of Education, is another of Cropper's former Northwestern law students.

As the first in his family to graduate from law school and college, Washington, who is African-American, said he appreciated Cropper's nurturing approach to helping him navigate his way through law school.

"She served as a good, strong knowledge base — understanding how to deal with professors, how to tackle the competitive notion of law school, and how to not let it become overwhelming or intimidating," Washington said. "Literally, she was like a friend, to the extent that you could go into her office and kind of loosen your tie. You could relax in her presence. By virtue of her creating that environment in her office, everyone who came to her was just more open to the potential to forming relationships. You could certainly get to know people better, just through Theresa."

Cropper acknowledged that it wasn't easy for her to break away from Northwestern.

"It was just such a wonderful, comfortable place, and I never, ever dreamed of leaving," she said. "I would tell people, 'Send your grandkids, I'll be here.' I said, 'You guys, when you make money, build me a porch right outside my office.'"

She said it was the persistence of her friend Peter Bynoe, now senior counsel in the Chicago office of DLA Piper, that prompted her to cut the cord and make the transition into the law firm world.

Bynoe was looking for the right fit for the position of national director of diversity, to assist the firm in achieving the goals it had articulated in its strategic plan in terms of creating an environment that would recruit, train, retain, and promote more diverse attorneys.

“What I was trying to do at the firm was really define diversity, not just in terms of minority associates and partners, but really, diversity in the context of improving the overall firm,” Bynoe said. “I needed somebody to make it work and make it work right. I needed somebody that was, really, a guaranteed winner.”

In Cropper’s three years at the law firm — where she had an impact on diversity retreats,

in the training of firm leaders on diversity issues, “and on making all our diverse attorneys and non-diverse attorneys know there was somebody who not only cared about the issue, but cared about the individual practicing attorneys” — Bynoe said he could see how her value in the law school setting quickly applied to the law firm world.

“Her primary focus when she came to Northwestern was minority students, and she ended up being the dean of all students,” Bynoe said. “I saw her do the same thing in the firm. Even though her initial focus was on minority partners and associates, assisting them in navigating the firm, very quickly it became clear that she was having a great impact on everybody in terms of the realities of how to be successful in a large international law firm — on how to focus on a career path, develop relationships, and really gain the respect of your peers to be successful, no matter what your background.”

Cropper, who is now into her ninth month at Perkins Coie, said she sees diversity — which comes down to “creating an inclusive community, where everybody gets a shot, and everybody knows what the shot is” — as her “mission” and her “passion.”

As a society, she said, there’s far more work to be done.

“You look and you say, ‘Okay, there are more people of color who are more successful, who are making more money.’ But there are still a lot of people, poor people, who are just underserved by our society in so many ways,” Cropper said.

“We cannot sit and say, ‘Things are really great now because, look at me, I’ve got a nice job, I drive a nice car.’ There’s so much work to be done. There are still inequities in so many places,” Cropper said. “For me, I’ve found a little niche where it’s clear to me where the inequities are, and I believe things can get better.” ■