

ACC – STL Honored with National Award for 2021 Best Diversity Initiative

Last month, the Association of Corporate Counsel - St. Louis Chapter (ACC STL) was honored to have received the 2021 Diversity Award by the Association of Corporate Counsel global association for the Diversity Bridges Program: Underground Railroad Program that provided members with the opportunity to take a guided tour of the Underground Railroad in Southern Illinois.

The program was organized by the ACC STL Bridges Group, a sub-committee of the Diversity and Inclusion Committee, the Co-Chairs of which were Nancy McCahan, Managing General Counsel, Sugar Creek Capital, and Denise Campbell Whitener, Senior Company Counsel, Wells Fargo & Co. At the time of the planning of the Underground Railroad Program, the 2021 Diversity Chairperson was Tamee Reese, Assistant Vice President – Senior Legal Counsel, DIRECTV, and the current Diversity Chairperson is Vikas Sunkari, Senior Managing Counsel, SSM Health.

“It’s an honor that the St. Louis Chapter was given this award, and I’m glad I was able to assist in that recognition with the planning and execution of our Bridges Group event. Our committee planned this event to provide an opportunity for our members to experience an important part of the history of our area and country up close and personal,” said McCahan.

“While this was a successful program, I believe it is the existence and uniqueness of the Chapter’s Bridges Group that likely played a significant role in earning the Chapter this recognition,” added McCahan.

Bridges, formed in 2015 by the then Diversity Committee Chairperson Kristol Simms, is a group of racially diverse members of the St. Louis ACC Chapter who engage in various activities, such as attending a relevant concert, play, art exhibit, or movie together, discussing a relevant book, or dining with each other in restaurants specializing in various ethnic cuisines, the purpose of which is to have respectful and open communication that crosses racial and cultural divides and to develop friendships and a stronger community.

For this program, ACC STL Bridges Group members experienced a private, guided tour, led by J.E. Robinson, professor, historian, and Underground Railroad expert, and organized by the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau, about the significance of the Underground Railroad in Alton, IL, and Godfrey, IL. Participants visited sites throughout Alton and Godfrey where escaped slaves took refuge as they worked their way to freedom while Professor Robinson told stories of the escaping slaves and what they might have gone through, including legal aspects of becoming free, and about those in the area who helped the enslaved in their journey to get to a free state. Sites visited included a basement tunnel in what is now an Alton apartment building, Rocky Fork Church, which purportedly was the first stop in a free state for escaped slaves leaving Missouri, and Union Baptist Church, which is considered one of the first Black churches in Illinois.

“It is hard to put into words how great this experience was. Professor Robinson’s passion for preserving our memory of the Underground Railroad resonated in his stories of heroic freedom seekers’ struggles and triumphs. It was truly inspirational and a memorable learning experience for us all,” said Whitener.

“What made this event special is that it encouraged deep and meaningful conversations amongst our members as we learned more about racial and cultural issues in America and personal stories of courage and hope,” added Whitener.

This is the second national award the ACC STL has received for its Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity programs and outreach. In 2020, the Chapter was awarded the Innovation Award by the global association for its 2019 Diversity & Inclusion Summer Internship Program.

If you would like to learn how to become involved with the ACC STL Diversity Committee, please contact Sue Wagner, ACC STL Chapter Administrator, at accstl@qabs.com.