

## Special focus: diversity

# NIBA Positively Changes the Legal Landscape for Pacific Northwest Indian People

by *Lael Echo-hawk & Gabe Galanda*

The Northwest Indian Bar Association (NIBA) is a non-profit organization of over 175 Native and Indian law attorneys, judges, spokespersons and law students in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Alaska. Founded in 1991, NIBA works to increase the number of Indian attorneys in the Pacific Northwest through legal education and advocacy.

The stated purposes and goals of NIBA are to:

Represent and foster the education and welfare of Native American attorneys, paralegals and tribal court personnel of the Pacific Northwest;

Provide role models and mentors in the legal profession for Indian people, particularly Native American youth and law students; and,

Encourage and promote pro bono legal work and civic involvement that benefits Indian people on reservations and in urban areas throughout the Northwest.

### Native Law Student Scholarships

In December 2004, NIBA gifted \$6,500 in scholarships to Northwest Native law students as part of an ongoing effort to support Indian students seeking a legal education. Since 2003, NIBA and its sister group, the Washington State Bar Association Indian Law Section, have raised and donated nearly \$40,000 in scholarships to aspiring Indian lawyers from Washington State, Oregon, Idaho and Alaska.

"NIBA is excited and grateful to be in a position to support Northwest Native law students, financially and otherwise," said NIBA President Lael Echo-hawk (Pawnee). "The Indian Legal Scholars Program awards acknowledge the students' demonstrated commitment to Indian Country and show-

case the Northwest tribal bar's pride in our future Indian lawyers."

Although NIBA and the Indian Law Section have long supported law students through financial assistance, the organization's recent scholarship donations represent their largest contributions to date. Recent scholarship monies have come from membership dues, a benefit auction, donations from the Northwest Minority Job Fair and WSTLA, and partnerships with the Tulalip Tribes, the Muckleshoot Tribe, the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe, the Sogwanish Tribe, the Swinomish Tribe, the Squaxin Island Tribe and the Puyallup Tribe.

On August 5, 2004, in Atlanta, the American Bar Association's General

Section. "The Program, which enables future Indian lawyers to reach their goals of joining the legal profession and representing Tribal people, is one that other bar associations and Native professional organizations should strive to emulate."

### Indian Law on the

#### Washington Bar Exam

In October 2004, NIBA and the Section were successful in their 2 1/2 year bid to make Washington the second state to test new lawyers' understanding of federal Indian jurisdiction on the bar exam, when the WSBA Board of Governors voted unanimously to include federal Indian jurisdiction on the Washington bar exam, effective the summer of 2007 (*Seattle Times*).

## Indian attorneys comprise just

**0.7 percent of the WSBA's 29,000 members.**

**Nationally, although 4.1 million people identified themselves as Native in the 2000 Census, only 1,700 (yes, seventeen hundred) are lawyers.**

Practice, Solo and Small Firm Section honored NIBA and the Indian Law Section with the prestigious "Solo and Small Firm Project Award" (*Washington State Bar News*). "The Indian Legal Scholarship Program is one of the most dynamic and innovative legal programs in the entire country," said Mike McBride, Council Member of the ABA General Practice Section and past Chair of the Oklahoma Bar Association Indian Law

Indian law becomes an integral part of many state bar exams."

The Washington bar exam will test the following federal Indian jurisdictional principles: tribal sovereignty ("the right of reservation Indians to make their own laws and be ruled by them," *Williams v. Lee*, (U.S. 1959)); tribal civil and criminal jurisdiction; tribal sovereign immunity; and the Indian Child Welfare Act.

NIBA's recent achievements are of particular importance when considered against statewide and national research findings. Indians are, without question, the most under-represented ethnic demographic in the legal profession. Indian attorneys comprise just 0.7 percent of the WSBA's 29,000 members. Nationally, although 4.1 million people identified themselves as Native in the 2000 Census, only 1,700 (yes, seventeen hundred) are lawyers. The fact that there are only 1,700 Indian attorneys in this era – the era of tribal self-determination – is even more striking when juxtaposed with the statistic that every year 35,000 (thirty-five thousand) new lawyers join our profession through bar passage.

Indeed, NIBA has its work cut out for it. For information about NIBA, visit [www.nwiba.org](http://www.nwiba.org).

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