

Hate and Recovery in 2021: Decalogue Society Co-Sponsors Multi-Bar Event to Address Hate Experienced During the Time of COVID

by Mitchell B. Goldberg

On January 21, 2021, the Decalogue Society of Lawyers, Cook County Bar Association, and the Asian American Bar Association Chicago hosted a forum to address issues regarding the hate experienced by the Jewish, African American, and Asian American communities in Chicago and nationally, primarily during the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020. The well-attended event, entitled "Hate and Recovery in 2021," featured a lineup of powerful speakers addressing specific issues, including legal issues, faced by, and the legal remedies and resources available to, the respective communities. The speakers also addressed how their bar associations and the legal community, generally, can support each other going forward into 2021.

The event's moderators, Decalogue President Patrick John and AABA Board member Sonni Choi Williams, opened the event emphasizing the importance of this topic in light of the frustrations experienced by so many during the pandemic and recent events in Washington, D.C.

Speakers included Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul; Jacqueline Carroll, co-chair of Decalogue's Committee Against Anti-Semitism and Hate and chair of the Simon Wiesenthal Center Midwest's Community Engagement Committee; Jerrod Williams, immediate past president of the CCBA, chair of the working group on legislative criminal justice reform for the ISBA's Steering Committee on Racial Inequality, and board member of Austin Coming Together; and Gary Zhao, immediate past president of the AABA and member of the executive committee of the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association.

Each of the speakers has been directly involved in confronting hate and fighting racist attacks and discrimination directed against various communities in Illinois and beyond. Each speaker delivered extremely important and powerful remarks regarding examples of hate experienced by the respective communities and the importance of joining together to combat such hate.

Jacqueline Carroll spoke about the fear and concern within the Jewish community over the past years following the attacks on synagogues, cemeteries, and sacred spaces in Pittsburgh, Poway, and elsewhere, the rise in anti-Jewish rhetoric and intimidation online, and mainstreaming of anti-Jewish ideas on both the right and left of this country, including litmus tests and discriminatory exclusion from student government and social justice activities directed against Jewish students on college campuses, particularly at the University of Illinois. With the coming of COVID-19, such activities have only escalated, with false accusations made that Jews and Israel are responsible for the coronavirus, and calls for harming Jews and infecting them with the virus. She also discussed legal issues impacting online hate and Title VI remedies against state universities that permit hostile environments towards Jewish students.

Jerrod Williams spoke about concerns and frustrations within the African American community regarding various injustices in recent years. He discussed the protests in the summer of 2020 that came following the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minnesota, issues of government interference with protestors' speech, and the impact of the protests on significant criminal justice reform in Illinois. He also spoke about issues of inequality and food security impacting the African American community, how the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated the problems, and potential solutions.

Gary Zhao spoke about fears and concerns within the Asian community resulting from hateful rhetoric, starting at the beginning of 2020, as the SARS-2 virus began spreading around the world. He addressed specific issues of hate directed towards the Asian community during the COVID-19 pandemic, including matters that were escalated due to hateful speech coming from the highest offices in the country. He also addressed how the Asian community, generally, and the Asian American bar associations in Chicago and nationally, came together to respond to such hate. This included working with local and state governments to educate the community about resources available to victims of hate.

Attorney General Kwame Raoul spoke about his own experiences with hate, the framework of Illinois' hate crimes statutes, the cooperation between his office and the offices of other state attorneys general and local governments to identify and combat hate-based crimes. He spoke of his own trip to Israel and Yad Vashem, and how that experience has helped his drive to work against attempts to dehumanize others. He spoke of his work with the Jewish, African American, and Asian American communities to address their specific concerns, and the resources available to those communities to report instances of hate crimes.

Following the speakers' individual remarks, the panel addressed questions from the audience and engaged in a discussion about various issues, including health care disparity and the potential for the respective bar associations to continue working together to combat hate and support each other's communities.

The event was conceived by Decalogue board members the Hon. Megan Goldish, Mitchell Goldberg and Jacqueline Carroll as a response to the extraordinary hate experienced by communities, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. Event coordinator and Decalogue past president Mitchell Goldberg stated as to the purpose of the event: "We all know what is going on in our communities. We feel attacked and alone. The racists want to isolate us. Accordingly, to defeat them, we have to come together and stand together." In her remarks, co-moderator Sonni Williams expressed her support for the program: "This is the first program that I participated in which had three communities affected by hate during the pandemic come together in unity."

Following the program, Goldberg said, "The issues addressed, and the comments and questions raised, were illuminating of the shared issues and concerns facing our communities, and of the importance of offering our visible and vocal support of each other. It also reminded us all of our important roles as attorneys and volunteers to help address them." Decalogue President Patrick John closed the program emphasizing the importance of promoting education and dialogue between groups that experience hate and expressing his hope that this event is the first of many opportunities to continue the dialogue.

Mitchell B. Goldberg is a past President of the Decalogue Society and Co-Chair of the Committee Against Anti-Semitism and Hate.