

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 163, No. 31

Serving Chicago's legal community for 162 years



At a surprise ceremony at Latham & Watkins LLP's offices on Monday, Rev. Mitchell Johnson lauds the work Lynda Holiday Lawrence, next to Johnson, has done for The Abolition Institute, which aims to eliminate slavery and human trafficking in Mauritania. Both Johnson and Lawrence sit on the institute's board of directors. *Photo by David Thomas*

Woman honored for anti-slavery fight

BY DAVID THOMAS
Law Bulletin staff writer

A Latham & Watkins LLP secretary was honored on Monday by a Chicago-area, anti-slavery group for her efforts to end the practice in the country of Mauritania.

The award was a surprise for Lynda Holiday Lawrence, who sits on the board of directors for The Abolition Institute, which is dedicated to ending slavery and human trafficking in the West African nation.

"I could not live my life sitting in Hyde Park, living a few blocks from the former president of the United States, work at a global, quality law firm I've been at for 18-plus years and see myself walk from the opportunity to support and fight for ... the work that is going on that we are representing today," Lawrence said.

Latham & Watkins secretary was surprised with award for her work against trafficking

Lawrence delivered her impromptu remarks to more than 170 people gathered in a conference room at her firm's Chicago office, 330 N. Wabash Ave. The crowd included both attorneys and a number of judges.

Monday's event was officially touted as a ceremony honoring Biram Dah Abeid and Braham Bilal Ramdhane, two prominent Mauritanian abolitionists who were jailed in November 2014 for their efforts to halt slavery in the country.

In an interview prior to the event's start, Lawrence estimated she spends 15 hours a week working with the institute. She does

her work in her time; the institute is not a client of Latham & Watkins.

"We do encourage everybody ... to be charitable in the community, to do what you can to give back," said Robin M. Hulshizer, the deputy office managing partner. "She's just gone above and beyond, so it was a no-brainer to invite them here and celebrate the victories they've secured and the work that is still left to be done."

Hulshizer said that, for at least 25 years, the firm has worked with organizations worldwide to combat slavery and human trafficking.

Since 2000, Latham & Watkins has provided \$1.2 billion in free

legal services and worked 2.7 million pro bono hours, according to Zulfikar Bokhari, a partner at the firm's Chicago office.

In 2012, Latham & Watkins was recognized by both Not for Sale, an international anti-slavery group, and the Thomson Reuters Foundation for its work to end human trafficking worldwide.

The U.S. government regards Mauritania as a Tier 3 country, in terms of human trafficking. This means it is not meeting the anti-trafficking standards codified within the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 and it is not making any effort to do so, even with the anti-slavery laws it has on the books.

Bokhari said the slavery system that exists in Mauritania today is similar to what existed in the United States prior to the Civil War.

Monday's event was replete with references to slavery in the United States and the efforts of President Abraham Lincoln to end the practice. Notably, the event was held on the same day the state of Illinois celebrated Lincoln's birthday.

For his part, Abeid referenced Lincoln twice in his written remarks, which were delivered by an English-speaking spokesman. Abeid is the president of the Initiative for the Resurgent Abolition Movement, or IRA-Mauritania, which is banned in his country.

"As we face slave masters, extremists, lifetime presidents, autocrats, theocrats, border closures, building walls, we, IRA-Mauritania, you, Abolition Institute and Latham & Watkins LLP ... we should

reaffirm our faith in humanity," Abeid said. "We should continue our peaceful effort and fight against injustice, oppression and racism."

Abeid and Ramdhane were freed in May 2016, and were hailed as heroes by the U.S. Department of State in an annual report on human trafficking — the Trafficking in Persons Report.

"Mr. Abeid and Mr. Ramdhane have successfully mounted provocative and high-profile anti-trafficking campaigns that have significantly contributed to new government institutions, laws and specialized courts designed to combat human trafficking," the 2016 report reads.

As a Tier 3 country, Mauritania is prohibited from receiving certain kinds of financial assistance

from the U.S. government.

However, in December 2016, the U.S. created the End Modern Slavery Initiative, a foundation that will provide funding to help victims of modern slavery and enforce anti-slavery laws.

The initiative seeks to provide \$1.5 billion in funding for various anti-slavery efforts; \$250 million will come from the U.S. government, while the rest will come from both private sources and foreign governments.

Lawrence said this initiative will provide at least \$5 million for anti-slavery efforts in Mauritania.

Lawrence indicated that the institute hopes to build on that initiative by building more awareness in Congress about human trafficking in Mauritania.

The event was also co-hosted by 19 different bar associations: 7th Circuit Bar Association, Asian American Bar Association, Black Women Lawyers Association, The Chicago Bar Association, Chicago Council of Lawyers, Chinese American Bar Association, Cook County Bar Association, Decalogue Society of Lawyers, Filipino American Lawyers Association, Hellenic Bar Association, Hispanic Lawyers Association of Illinois, Illinois Judicial Council, Illinois State Bar Association, International Human Rights Law Institute, Lesbian and Gay Bar Association of Chicago, Muslim Bar Association of Chicago, National Bar Association, Puerto Rican Bar Association, and Women's Bar Association of Illinois.