

Rainmakers Part 2: Mentors and Role Models

By Patrick Folliard

In the last issue of *Diversity & the Bar*[®], ten partners of color shared some thoughts on how they “make it rain,” and reflected on how their careers developed. Now, in the following pages, those same ten rainmakers discuss the importance of mentors and role models in building a successful legal career.

“If it takes a village to raise a child, then it takes an entire metropolitan area to raise a partner of color,” says **Joan M. Haratani**, litigation partner at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius’s San Francisco office. “I’m literally the result of dozens of people caring about me and wanting me to succeed in a profession that has traditionally been less than welcoming to women and minorities.” Those dozens include Daniel Johnson, an African American partner also at Morgan Lewis whom Haratani describes as “one of the best trial lawyers in the nation.”

Haratani continues, “[Johnson] was a classmate of Hillary Clinton at Yale, he possesses an incredible skill set, and his track record as a trial lawyer is unparalleled. He also cares a great deal about the partners and associates at the firm, and he is refreshingly forthcoming with honest advice that other partners are understandably hesitant to offer.” For example, Johnson gave Haratani tips on ways to maximize her delivery and presence in any situation, from a law firm management meeting to the courtroom.



“He took a risk in pointing out an area where I needed improvement,” says Haratani. “But he told me in a very supportive way, letting me know that as an attorney of color he’s walked in my shoes and made similar mistakes. He did me an amazing service.”

Among her many mentors, Haratani counts attorneys of color like Johnson, but she also stresses that a minority associate needs white male mentors as well: “The power structure is still predominantly white male, and if you don’t have a fan in management, you are history. When it comes to mentors, you must have both.”

Joseph B. Alexander

Jr., the co-head of Hunton

& Williams’s private

equity practice group in

its Atlanta office, agrees.

“While the black mentor/mentee relationship is

critical,” says Alexander,

who is African American,

“it’s also critical for an

African American attorney

to forge relationships with as many white partners

as possible. It’s especially important to connect with

power partners, those who either have seniority or large

books of business, and preferably someone within your

own practice area.”

The first partner that Alexander worked for—

Katherine B. Seaborn at Gardere in Dallas—also was his

first mentor. Alexander credits Seaborn with instilling

in him the concept of business development as a way of

life, something that wasn’t intuitive to him as a young

attorney. “Katherine promoted my relationship-building

with junior level people at her clients, people who would

be in a position in the future to give me work.”

Later, when he lateralled into Hunton & Williams

in 1995 as a third-year associate, a then-partner, J.

Stephen Hufford, guided Alexander on his way to

becoming a senior associate. According to Alexander,

Hufford broke down his associate years into three very

lucid, manageable stages, with business development

becoming more important as the stages progressed.



“Without Katherine and Steve,” says Alexander, “I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

“I try to effectively mentor people who work for me, as well as some of the African American associates in the office, but I don’t believe you should rely primarily on formally arranged mentor relationships,” says Alexander. “You need a solid personal connection for it to really work; these relationships can’t be forced or they’re ineffective.”

Pauline A. Schneider,

a public finance partner

in Orrick, Herrington, &

Sutcliffe LLP’s DC office,

cites two formidable women

as seminal role models in

life—her mother, who had

six children, always worked,

found time for community

activities, and talked about

the importance of giving back; and Eleanor Farrar, an

academic who employed Schneider prior to her attending

Yale Law School and taught her important lessons

in work/life balance. “When I headed off to law school

to pursue my practice area as a single mother with two

kids, I already had a pretty good idea about how to

manage things—forget about a perfectly clean house,

and while it was important to have a dinner as a family,

it wasn’t important whether or not I had actually

cooked the meal.”

Among the professional mentors who have given

guidance to Schneider are lawyer and presidential advisor

Vernon Jordan, and another high profile African

American male: “This may surprise a few people, but

[former Washington, DC, mayor] Marion Barry was

a wonderful mentor to me,” says Schneider, who, after

leaving a non-legal position at the Carter White House,

went to work under then-Mayor Barry as the head of

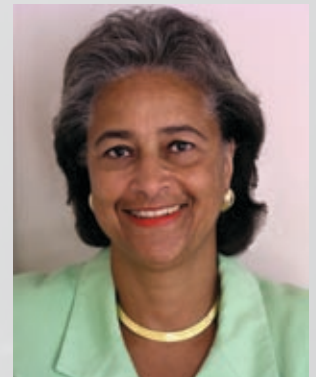
the DC Office of Intergovernmental Relations. “Barry

believed that if people are smart they can do things, so

despite my lack of experience he hired me. I made some

mistakes early on, but he was very supportive, as well as

shrewd, savvy, and thoughtful. I definitely learned a lot.”



Rainmakers Part 2

W. Ray Persons, a litigation partner in the Atlanta office of King & Spalding, says, “It’s terrific to have a person of color as a mentor if you can find one. As a young black attorney thirty years ago, I didn’t have anybody who looked like me doing what I wanted to do.”



Nevertheless, Persons did have a mentor—William E. Knepper, the late senior partner of the national law firm of Arter & Hadden—and Persons speaks of him in glowing terms. “Bill [Knepper] was not a minority, but we shared a passion for the law and a commitment for excellence. He saw those qualities in me and provided me coaching to ensure my success,” says Persons. “As the head of the Columbus office, Knepper gave me my first job, and in doing so brought the first African American into the office in any capacity. He also made sure the firm hired its first woman attorney. Bill possessed an unmatched skill set, and was a phenomenal human being. Throughout my career, I’ve strived to emulate him.”

Because Persons was without a professional black role model at the start of his career, he goes out of his way to mentor minority associates. In today’s environment, where there are attorneys of color doing the things that young minority attorneys aspire to do, Persons notes that it would be foolhardy for these associates not to take advantage of the more senior attorneys’ knowledge and experience.

An original thinker and corporate partner at Haynes and Boone LLP’s Dallas office, **Wilson Chu** says, “I really didn’t have formal mentors per se, but throughout my life and career, I’ve had friends who were the source of valuable advice—I guess I could call them ‘virtual mentors.’” Likewise, he doesn’t do any formal mentoring, but he does concede that he is friends with younger lawyers whose careers he has undoubtedly helped along. For instance, former Haynes and Boone associate Lu Pham, now partner at a Dallas boutique employment firm, often greets Chu as “*sensei*”

(Japanese for “teacher”). “Lu’s done so well in his career,” says Chu. “We now joke that ‘the teacher has become the student.’”

“Whether you label it mentor or friend, you must have people around to bounce ideas off of; you can’t develop your career in a vacuum,” says Chu. “There’s a lot to learn from people who’ve done it before you—young associates can either learn from my mistakes or they’re free to make their own. At NAPABA [National Asian Pacific American Bar Association], the in-house counsel committee has formally established a very successful mentor program. And our ‘Best Under 40’ group co-sponsors, with MCCA, 8-Minute Mentoring events in which some of NAPABA’s most outstanding young Asian attorneys ‘speed mentor’ interested law students.”



Nagendra (Nick) Setty, managing principal at Fish & Richardson LLP in Atlanta, says “My first mentor was Larry Nodine, a law professor at Emory and a partner at my first firm. He taught me how to behave and how to excel in a law firm. And because I came to law school with a science background, meaning little true writing experience, Larry taught me from scratch how to write persuasively.”



Early on, Nodine instilled in Setty the sense that to make it in the legal profession, a young attorney must learn to be the best secretary, paralegal, associate, and partner that he could be. In other words, one needs to learn how to carry a project from point one to completion, and recognize that ultimately the individual attorney must be responsible for all the aspects of the project.

Today, Setty shares his mentor’s sage advice with his younger associates. “I call it thinking like an owner: everything you touch, you own,” says Setty, who is a

mentor to Fish's diverse group of attorneys. "I've been fortunate to have had very good patent, trademark, and other attorneys who've taken me under their wings, and now I feel it's my turn to return the favor by mentoring," he explains. "When someone calls me for thoughts on something that they're facing in a case or in advising a client, I try to provide more than legal analysis, perhaps adding some sense of the nuance involved in delivering the advice."

"Throughout my career, all of my mentors have been white," reflects Setty. "Recently I learned that I was the first Indian attorney to be partner in a major Atlanta firm. Now there are Indian partners in at least half a dozen major firms around town. It's important that we serve as role models and give our younger colleagues a leg up."

"I want minority African American associates to be able to say **Victor Vital** was one of my mentors," says Vital, a litigation partner at Baker Botts LLP's Dallas office. "I feel it's my obligation to share what I know with as many young law students and attorneys coming through the pipeline as possible. There were senior African American partners who could have extended themselves to me but chose not to, and frankly it bothered me. I don't want people coming behind me to feel the way that I've felt."

In his third year of law school, Vital externed for the Honorable Calvin Botley, a federal magistrate judge in Houston and Vital's first professional mentor. "He advised me on the importance of doing certain things as an African American attorney, including giving 110% on any project or assignment, because, unfortunately, there are misperceptions and stereotypes that African Americans have to fight through." Another early role model for Vital was African American attorney Troy Cotton, a current ExxonMobil attorney and client of Vital's. "Troy was a year ahead of me at [Texas Southern University's Thurgood Marshall School of Law], and I noticed him because he was



good in mock trial, and mock trial was my passion in law school." After graduation, Cotton moved on to the Harris County's District Attorney's Office in Houston. When Vital applied to the same office a year later, Cotton provided him with assistance and recommendations. And after Vital was hired by that office, Cotton—unbeknownst to him—remained a role model for the young Vital.

"Of course, it's fine and helpful to have majority role models too," adds Vital, who has been mentored by majority partners throughout his career, including at Haynes and Boone, his previous firm. Currently, Vital is on the lookout for his next mentor. "When you reach a more senior level it becomes harder to find mentors," he explains. "Still, I continue to observe and emulate superstar trial lawyers from afar, thinking to myself 'in 10 or 20 years, I'd like to have his career.'"

Stephen A. Riddick,

a corporate partner at Greenberg Traurig LLP's Washington, DC, and Tysons Corner, Va., offices, says "I believe minority associates should take their mentors as they find them...without regard to race or gender. As a young professional, if you find a veteran professional in your or a related field who can—and is willing to—take an interest in your career and personal life (if appropriate), you are quite lucky and should, by all means, take advantage of that opportunity."



"As a matter of fact," he continues, "the associate in my group with whom I work most closely is a majority associate. Over the past few years, I have spent a great deal of time mentoring him on topics ranging from substantive legal work to career strategies to personal matters. His name is Christopher Davis."

Among Riddick's first professional mentors was George L. Russell Jr., Baltimore's first African American judge and later a partner at the firm (then-titled Piper & Marbury) where Riddick began his career. Because Russell was a trial lawyer, the pair's connection was not substantive; nevertheless, the

Rainmakers Part 2

mentor did enlighten still-green Riddick on how to gauge people and survive in a large firm while remaining grounded. It was from another man, Richard C. Tilghman (who is white), that Riddick learned the nuts and bolts of corporate lawyering. Riddick worked primarily with Tilghman for six years at Piper, and credits Tilghman with laying out the successful four-year plan that allowed him to make partner.

Deryck A. Palmer, a financial restructuring partner in Cadwalader, Wickersham, & Taft LLP's New York office, notes that "an African American attorney really needs both minority and majority mentors. Obviously, minority mentors are helpful



because they can more easily relate to, and understand, the unique experiences of African American attorneys. Such empathy facilitates more candid and fruitful discussions on a variety of issues. But majority mentors are equally critical in creating opportunities and facilitating relationships at a majority firm, and in serving as an important reality check. While a minority attorney may conclude that a negative firm experience stemmed from issues related to race, the majority mentor can offer a different perspective, explaining that a particular issue 'is not one of race, but instead something that all attorneys go through as part of the development process.' Gaining such insight into varied points of view can spell the difference between success and failure for a minority associate."

According to Palmer, mentor/mentee relationships tend to thrive where there is personal chemistry, good work product, and a commonality of interests. Those relationships work best, in his experience, when forged organically, rather than forced upon the parties. However it happens, "having a partner mentor—whether majority or minority—opens doors to work with the partner's client base," reflects Palmer. Indeed, partner mentors are essential to facilitating the integration of African American attorneys into the firm practice, from providing associates with excellent

assignments and training experiences to new business development opportunities to introducing associates to clients and transitioning client relationships, as well as a host of other intangibles, that are valuable for a young lawyer of any race or ethnicity at a private law firm.

For **Gary A. Hernandez**, an insurance partner at Sonnenschein, Nath & Rosenthal LLP, mentors have played an invaluable role in his career. "While I've known many excellent mentors, three have been particularly crucial in helping me to navigate my way," says Hernandez. "Former San Francisco



city attorney Louise Renne groomed me to be a lawyer—she gave me my first law job, and introduced me to the courtroom and jury trial. When I went into government, Rick Baum, then-chief deputy of the California Department of Insurance, took me under his wing and taught me how to manage an organization with 500 people, not an easy task for a lawyer who has been taught to dissect sentences and look for the possibility of a dire outcome in every situation. And here at Sonnenschein, former firm chairman and current partner Duane Quaini generously showed me the ins and outs of building a practice. He was and continues to be an instrumental mentor for me at the firm."

Hernandez, who forewent much of the typical early law firm path by entering private practice as a partner, is surprised by the number of associates who do not seek out mentors: "Many don't ask, or some ask but don't follow up," he says. "Maybe it's because some young attorneys in big law firms have been successfully self-reliant throughout their law school and professional careers prior to being hired by firms? I'm not sure, but from my experience mentors are essential—not to drag you up the ladder, but to work beside you and assist you in becoming the best attorney you can possibly be." **DB**

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