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Leading Questions: Morgan Lewis Litigation Partner Sandra Moser

Lawyers are great at asking questions, but how are they at answering them? Bloomberg Law is talking with lawyers and other legal industry players at the top of their fields to find out what makes them tick, what challenges they face, and how they do what they do.

Former chief of the Justice Department's Fraud Section [Sandra Moser](#) returned last month to the Big Law firm that was her professional home earlier in her career, Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, where she'll work out of the Philadelphia and Washington offices.

The white-collar defense partner arrived at Morgan Lewis after nearly two years at Quinn Emanuel, where she co-led the firm's investigations, government enforcement, and white collar criminal defense practice. As head of DOJ's Fraud Section, she led a team of more than 150 white collar prosecutors and oversaw the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act Unit, as well as the section's healthcare, securities, and financial fraud prosecutions. She was a litigation associate at Morgan Lewis from 2005-2006.

Bloomberg Law spoke to Moser about the need to diversify litigation practices in Big Law firms, the importance of government service for young lawyers, and the time when then-Assistant Attorney General Ken Blanco saved the day by producing a box full of toys.

This conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

Bloomberg Law: What sets Morgan Lewis apart from other Big Law firms?

Sandra Moser: In addition to the strength of its growing white collar practice, a number of things brought me back to the firm. If I had to narrow it down, I'd say its genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion, its integrated and collaborative culture globally, and its unrelenting focus on client service. As the largest law firm in the world [led by a woman](#), Morgan Lewis's efforts to promote diversity and inclusion are evident in its choice of leadership at the top as well as throughout the firm. I think it says a lot that many of the relationships I formed here before I left for the public sector 15 years ago are still intact.

BL: What is the biggest challenge currently facing your practice area?

SM: Undeniably, there are many incredible, powerhouse female and diverse white collar litigators, but the overall practice remains—at the equity partnership and highest leadership levels—dominated by men who often fit the same demographic. As is true across much of the legal profession, women and minorities in white collar

historically have had to navigate a private sector that has had difficulty recognizing and accounting for some of the challenges that disproportionately affect them and, in turn, impact recruitment, promotion, and retention.

There is a lot of discussion about the need to do better, and I have already seen in my brief time at Morgan Lewis that we can. Several of the firm's diverse and women partners hold leadership positions from office managing partners to advisory board members, and half of the partners in the white collar practice are women. And there are real-time, proactive efforts to do better than just better—including our establishment of Mobilizing for Equality, a task force created to act on the firm's commitment to racial justice.

BL: Your work has essentially shifted from working more like a prosecutor to working more like a defense lawyer. How hard was that shift for you?

SM: There are days when the two roles can feel quite different and others not so much. The substantive work of any attorney handling complex corporate or related fraud and corruption cases boils down to an aggressive pursuit and knowledge of the facts, and being able to identify both the strengths and weaknesses—ultimately in terms of meeting the elements of an offense—that flow from those facts. I think the shift for many exists in terms of understanding that the role of a defense lawyer is more nuanced and one that requires not just mastering the facts, but knowing and appropriately addressing and managing your audience.

BL: What is your favorite "war story" from your career/practice?

SM: A memory that stands out for me was very early during my tenure heading the Fraud Section—during a decidedly pre-Covid-19 era, before kids, dogs, and whoever else might be roaming around in the background became an accepted part of the landscape. Having tried to drop my 2-year-old son at "school" one morning, only to realize it was closed that day, I weighed what seemed like the untenable options of leaving him watching C-SPAN under the eye of a colleague in my office, or dragging him through Justice security for a briefing with then-Assistant Attorney General Ken Blanco. I chose the latter. My son didn't exactly rise to the occasion—pulling down his pants and crawling under the table at one point—but, thanks to a very unexpected box of toys produced by none other than the AAG, we managed to make it through the meeting. And the AAG messaged me that night to say it was the best day he'd had on the job in months.

BL: What advice would you give an associate just starting out his/her Big Law career?

SM: There is no one prescription for success, so it's critical for any young lawyer to be thoughtful and introspective both about what success means to them personally—which is likely to morph over time—and in knowing there is more than one way to get there. Those potential paths will rise up to meet those who are authentic and engaged, not simply smart and hardworking (that, generally, is a given), because those traits will allow you to connect and form relationships that will take you places that your resume or annual billing rate simply cannot. I will also say that as a big firm partner

who spent only a couple of years in private practice—roughly 15 years ago—I am a proponent of government service. It provides an invaluable opportunity to learn the ropes and see the world from across the table.

BY MARY ELLEN EGAN

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