

MVP: Morgan Lewis' Grace E. Speights

Law360 (November 29, 2018, 3:53 PM EST) -- Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP partner Grace E. Speights, who is defending PBS against Tavis Smiley's claim he was wrongfully fired after facing sexual harassment allegations, has emerged as a go-to legal adviser for high-profile employers looking to evaluate their workplaces and navigate issues related to the #MeToo movement, earning her a spot among Law360's Employment MVPs.

WHY SHE'S AN EMPLOYMENT ATTORNEY:

For Speights, interest in employment law began at a young age. She said she first started to think about how she could improve workplaces when she accompanied her mom to her factory job. Speights is now the leader of Morgan Lewis & Bockius' labor and employment practice.

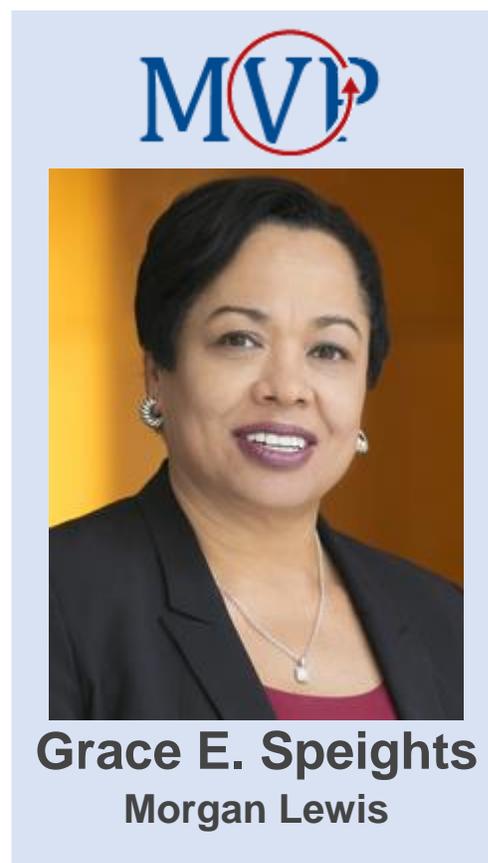
"Given what I saw that went on in the factory and some of the conditions, I often thought, even as a teenager, what could I do to improve some of those conditions," Speights said.

However, once she was at George Washington University Law School, Speights said that employment law wasn't even really in the back of her mind.

"When I went to law school, what was really in my mind was just making sure I got out of law school — that I was going to graduate," Speights said.

Speights started at Morgan Lewis as a summer associate, but clerked for U.S. District Judge Aubrey Robinson after she graduated from GW before coming back to the firm. Once she returned, Speights wasn't sure exactly what she wanted to do, but thought that she could get more out of being a generalist, she said.

She had been working as a litigator in Morgan Lewis' litigation group for more than a decade — becoming



Grace E. Speights
Morgan Lewis

the firm's first African-American female partner in 1991 — when a partner in the firm's labor and employment group asked her to help out on a case.

"I really enjoyed it. It reminded me of my days as a teenager where I had thought about employment and helping companies to provide better workplaces for their employees," Speights said. "I did that case and absolutely enjoyed it and transferred into our employment group."

BEING AN "ALLY" TO THE #METOO MOVEMENT:

Speights said that she's always had a passion for and enjoyed her work because of its fascinating nature. This past year, she said that more than 95 percent of her work has been helping companies navigate the issues surrounding the #MeToo movement.

"It's very exciting, because we have been able to be sort of what I would call — these are my words — an ally to the movement, even as management-side lawyers," Speights said. "Because what I've been doing at least over the last year is helping companies try to ensure that their workplaces are safe, inclusive and respectful. And that has arisen out of the context of the #MeToo movement."

Speights is currently defending the breach-of-contract and racial bias lawsuit that former on-air personality Smiley lodged against PBS after his show was suspended and he was terminated in the wake of sexual harassment allegations against him. In May, Speights won the dismissal of Smiley's tort claims under the District of Columbia Anti-SLAPP Act and also won attorneys' fees from Smiley for succeeding on the motion. Speights is also leading the media company's countersuit against Smiley that alleges that he flouted his morality clause and wants to recoup \$1.9 million in unused production budget funds.

This past year, Speights also served as the special investigation counsel to NPR's board of directors' special committee on sexual harassment for an independent probe regarding allegations of sexual harassment by Michael Oreskes, the former senior vice president of news at the company. The two-month investigation looked at what management had known about the allegations and when, as well as what actions they took regarding them. The report made several recommendations to NPR, including that the company do background checks and make inquiries about prior sexual harassment matters during the hiring process.

Speights also investigated allegations of sexual harassment by Wayne Pacelle, the chief executive officer of the Humane Society of the United States, in an internal investigation that began in December 2017. The investigation ultimately resulted in Pacelle resigning in February. And Speights earlier had helped Fidelity Investments Inc. evaluate its workplace culture in its asset management division after two fund managers left the company following sexual harassment allegations.

"Companies, at least the clients that I work with, are very committed to making change and making sure that their environments are safe, inclusive and respectful," Speights said. "And if, for some reason, something goes wrong in their workplace, they are looking for ways to try to make employees feel comfortable in coming forward to complain about it. Because one of the things obviously that the #MeToo movement has shown us is that there are many instances of sexual harassment that have gone unreported."

HER PROUDEST MOMENT:

Speights said that she doesn't have one single proudest moment but feels pride every time a client goes to her for one of its most challenging and difficult problems. She added that having grown up in a low-income, single parent household — "a loving mom, but we had very little" — and reaching the place where she is in her career now is also a proudest moment of hers.

"And to have my 93-year-old mother still alive and able to see what she accomplished by being able to raise a daughter to get to this point makes me very proud," Speights said.

HER ADVICE TO YOUNG ATTORNEYS:

Speights had two pieces of advice for young attorneys. First, she said that employment was a great area to be practicing in, because of the opportunity to make contributions to organizations, companies and society in general regardless of which side of the bar you're on.

"It's a broad area, learn as much as you can in that area," Speights said. "And be available for your clients as a trusted adviser to help them make a difference in their workplace."

Second, Speights said that it was important for attorneys to "get from behind your desk."

"There's so much pressure to come in and work hard, but being a great attorney and excelling involves more than coming into your office and working hard," Speights said. "It involves networking, it involves finding and interacting with mentors and sponsors, and it also involves giving back to the community in some way — whether it's through community involvement or pro bono work. Doing all of that I think will make you a well-rounded attorney."

"If someone had given me that advice when I was in law school, I probably would have done all that stuff a lot earlier than I started doing it," she added.

— *As told to Danielle Nichole Smith*

Law360's MVPs are attorneys who have distinguished themselves from their peers over the past year through high-stakes litigation, record-breaking deals and complex global matters. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2018 MVP winners after reviewing nearly 1,000 submissions.

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