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Grace Speights Is The American Lawyer's Attorney of the Year

#MeToo was light on corporate culture, and Speights redefined the employment lawyer's role in the movement.

By Ben Seal

Grace Speights, whose labor and employment-focused work in 2018 made her an ally of the #MeToo movement, was named the Attorney of the Year at the American Lawyer Industry Awards on Wednesday night.

Speights' fellow finalists were Bill Deckelman, the general counsel of DXC Technology Co. whose partnership with UnitedLex reimaged how legal departments can work, and David Sanford, the chairman of class action firm Sanford Heisler Sharp who has brought gender bias claims against large law firms on behalf of female partners who felt they were given short shrift.

In accepting the award, Speights said her #MeToo-focused work began from a conversation with Morgan, Lewis & Bockius chair Jami Wintz McKeon.



Photo: Diego Radzinski

Grace Speights, partner with Morgan, Lewis & Bockius.

“She suggested to us that the #MeToo movement presented an opportunity to be a change agent,” Speights said.

During her acceptance speech, she took a moment to thank the clients at the center of her work.

“We could not have done this without the many clients who are willing to engage us to handle some of the most sensitive

employment matters they will ever have,” Speights said.

Speights admits that the work she’s been doing this year would have seemed like asking for trouble not long ago.

“If a client would have asked most employment defense lawyers whether or not they should do a cultural assessment, the answer probably would have been

no,” Speights said earlier this year. “The rationale would be, ‘Why are you going out looking for problems?’”

But in the #MeToo era, things have changed.

Speights, head of the labor and employment group at Morgan Lewis, has led a group of lawyers across multiple practices in litigation, investigations and cultural assessments within organizations.

“A lot of people have said to me, ‘You’re a defense lawyer, you’re a management lawyer. ... How is it that you can be an ally of the movement?’” Speights said.

But corporations have become more proactive about preventing sexual misconduct rather than covering it up, and they’re turning to lawyers such as Speights to identify the problems in their company culture that may allow sexual misconduct to pervade.

“Many employers thought they had safe, inclusive and respectful workplaces, but they did not,” Speights said. “We are an ally of the movement, and it’s very different from what we did exclusively many, many years ago.”

Around Christmas 2017, Speights found herself inundated, she said. She had just been hired to conduct a particularly large-scale investigation of the Humane Society, arising from sexual harassment allegations against

then-CEO Wayne Pacelle. (He ultimately resigned after Morgan Lewis’ report was completed.) So she reached out to firm chairwoman Jami Wintz McKeon.

In a matter of weeks, they formulated a team of about 30 lawyers—all women. About a dozen, mostly labor and employment lawyers, work on #MeToo-related issues full-time, Speights said. They have also called on white-collar, e-data, executive compensation and employee benefits, and governance lawyers.

Speights and her team were behind many of the investigations of the organizations whose #MeToo stories have made headlines in the past year.

They evaluated NPR after allegations of sexual harassment arose against Michael Oreskes, then the senior vice president of news. Oreskes resigned before the investigation was complete, but NPR still publicly released the full findings.

Morgan Lewis also defended the Public Broadcasting Service against on-air personality Tavis Smiley’s breach-of-contract suit, after he was terminated for sexual harassment claims.

Law firms, too, have turned to Speights’ group to investigate claims of bullying and sexual harassment, Morgan Lewis said.

McKeon contends that not just any longtime employment defense lawyer would be able to

help these clients navigate their cultural pitfalls. Speights, she said, earns the trust of both employers and employees, in dealing with matters where tensions run high.

“She brings that judgment and her insight about people to the job she does. She’s not coming in there just as a technical scholar or an academic, or someone who can recite what the law is,” McKeon said. “The things she does have a much better chance than almost everybody else at being something everyone can live with.”

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