

**OUR REGULAR COLUMN, WHERE WE PROFILE A LEADING LAWYER OR A GC'S CAREER WHILE THEY REFLECT ON ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES VIA THE LENS OF GIVING ADVICE TO THE NEXT GENERATION. THIS TIME WE SPEAK TO JAMI WINTZ MCKEON, CHAIR OF MORGAN LEWIS AND ONE OF THE FEW WOMEN CURRENTLY LEADING AN AM LAW 20 LAW FIRM.**

**Diversity & the Bar:** What first made you want to become a lawyer?

**Jami Wintz McKeon:** I was attracted to a lot of the things that went into being a lawyer. I liked analysis, problem-solving and fixing things; being the eldest of four children I had to solve problems for everyone else! I also came from a theatre background - virtually all my family were involved in theatre growing up - so the theatrics of the law, particularly in trial work which I specialize in, appealed to me. It was really the fact that the law was a combination of all those interests. From the first day I walked into Morgan Lewis, I was waiting for other shoe to drop, but it never did. It has turned out to be the perfect profession for me.

**D&tB:** What are the key steps in achieving success as a lawyer and what was most useful to you in these?

**JWM:** I was really very lucky to work for a whole variety of terrific people when I started and my later success was due to their mentoring me and involving me in client matters. They made me feel I could both do this and add value; and this was incredibly important to my success. Success begets confidence, which begets more success, and these people who believed in me gave me opportunities. The fact is that it doesn't matter how smart you are; even if you are the most talented person, unless you are given opportunities, you won't be able to shine. Being granted opportunities is what can drive you to try harder and succeed. I was lucky as a young lawyer to have a lot of people who were willing to give me them.

I didn't have to seek these people out myself as that was very much the culture of Morgan Lewis and still is today; the approach on the part of the partners is that you are on our team and everyone joins together to make you successful. I got lucky in that one of my earliest mentors was Art Littleton who was wonderful at involving me and telling everyone how good I was. His father was one of our early chairs and coined the firm's mantra: "There's no limit to what we can achieve, as long as no one cares who gets the credit." Working for someone like Art right at the beginning was a great example and set me in the right path.

**D&tB:** Is there one failure or challenge that you now can see was actually helpful in shaping your career?

**JWM:** There were many I am sure, but two come to mind. As a relatively junior partner, I tried a case in front of a federal judge who told me that when he was a prosecutor, he liked to try cases against women because he liked to see how long it took to make them cry. He made clear to me that he had carried some of that over as a judge, and he did his best to shake me. When I held my ground, he became a big supporter. I learned from that and from experiences with some condescending opposing counsel to ignore the atmospherics and focus on the job at hand; in each instance, I learned more about how to deal with those situations and more about my own confidence and ability to excel despite false barriers. The second instance was when I was a second- or third-year associate working with one of our partners



JAMI WINTZ MCKEON

on a trial which should never have made it to the courtroom. It was a very emotional, difficult case involving the death of a longshoreman. We lost the case and it was so painful both to lose and then go back to the office immediately to work on post-trial motions. Two years later, we won the appeal and the court agreed that the case should never have been brought. While that victory didn't take sting out of that loss, it did teach me that the practice of law is a marathon, not a sprint and that, as my husband says to our kids, it's never as good or bad as it seems; you just have to persevere and many times, you will ultimately prevail.

**D&tB:** You have spoken before about the importance of being authentic in succeeding at work. How has that informed your own career and the way you lead Morgan Lewis?

**JWM:** I think there is no substitute for being authentic. The term gets thrown around a lot but it is really important to be someplace you can be you, because you have to bring your best self to work every day. You can never be at your best if you're pretending to be someone else - it's exhausting and ineffective. It's important to figure out if the career and place you have chosen to work mesh with who you are. When I joined Morgan Lewis in the early eighties, there were very few women and no women with young children.

At that time, the articulated wisdom in law firms for women was you should act like a man and not talk about your kids or have their pictures on your desk, and you certainly never brought them into the office. That just wasn't going to work for me, so I ignored that and did what felt right - which includes all of those things you weren't supposed to do. But what I found was that this supposedly conservative law firm embraced how I was. That made a huge difference. I have always just been who I am. That doesn't mean, of course, that you just spew forth every thought you have, but it does mean you have to be able to show who you are, what is important to you, and what you care about.

**D&tB:** What, in your opinion, can and should law firms and legal departments be doing in regards to extending the pipeline for diverse entrants? What would be your top practical tip to achieve that?

**JWM:** I think that we have to focus earlier on in people's careers to help diverse candidates see the opportunity and value of working at law firms. Right now we compete more than at any time in history for talent not just with law firms, but with other opportunities. Law firms no longer have a monopoly on what you can do with a law degree. So, it's really important to give potential candidates the vision earlier on about how they can succeed and why this is a good

path. Law firms have to be proactive and have to get involved at law schools, including law schools where they don't usually recruit, not just the top law schools. We reach into undergraduate colleges and the early stages of law schools to try to build relationships with diverse candidates so they will think about a career in a law firms generally and specifically at Morgan Lewis.

**D&tB:** The pipeline is one thing but all diverse attorneys can face challenges in moving into leadership. There are still very few law firm leaders, particularly in big law, that are women or diverse. Are there any key practical tips you would give a younger female or diverse lawyer who wants to become a law firm leader?

**JWM:** First, I do not agree with the statement that if you can see it, then you can be it. For many of us, myself included, that just wasn't true. But we are also past the point where we should be talking about trailblazers; there are enough women in law firms who are and can be law firm leaders. So you SHOULD be "seeing it" where you are.

As women and diverse individuals we need to look around; if your firm says it prizes diversity, look at who the firm leaders are; who leads practice groups, offices, client relationships? If diversity is not there and the firm is relying on a claim that they just don't have "enough" or "the right" women, you should find somewhere else to work.

Second, to succeed in a firm, I cannot overestimate the importance of building relationships. They are the currency of success in law firms: relationships with clients and with each other. You cannot sit back and think that if you do good work, people will notice.

One thing we say to everyone at the firm is that it's not just about being good at what you do, you also have to be good to the people around you. Universally, at every stage of your career, there will be competing factors and issues that can curtail people's abilities to focus. What's key to advancing diversity and inclusion is allowing people to bring their whole selves to work and for individuals they work with and the organizations they are in to be understanding of that.

**D&tB:** Was there a particular individual or individuals whom you would say has been most influential in

helping you achieve your success?

**JWM:** There were many. I think of Art Littleton because he was the first man I worked with. Many years later I took a trial advocacy program and Art (who was retired) took the role of one of the witnesses and I got to cross examine him. Afterwards, he wrote me a lovely note saying he was so glad to be part of what contributed to my success. I told him that whatever success I enjoyed had started with him and that I was very grateful to him.

I had a secretary, Maria O'Connor, for about 14 years who worked with me from when I was an associate to my first involvement in leadership. She was really helpful to me, not just in the work she did directly to support me but also because she viewed herself as extension of me; she always treated everyone who called me with respect, practiced what I preached about inclusion and dignity, and made me look good. She was an important factor in my success.

Finally, the kindness of fellow partners, judges, others in the community, and opposing counsel, and all of my colleagues have been significant contributing factors to my success. No person is an island and you need lots of mentors who can help you.

**D&tB:** Finally, with hindsight, what would be the one piece of advice you'd give your younger self?

**JWM:** I'd say focus on the importance of relationships. I always understood that importance, but might not have really known why it was so important when I was younger. Also, I would remind myself that your career - and life itself - is a marathon and not a sprint. There will be periods of time where things are great and there will be periods of time when you aren't jumping up in the morning excited to greet the day. There will also be times in life where, due to other factors, it will be easier or harder to do your job: when you have challenges with money, health, children or parents, relationship issues - any number of things; everyone has some of them. Knowing you can get through these periods will be easier if you have built relationships that you can trust to support you through the good times and times of sorrow. That is what real partnership is about, and I am thankful every day that I found it in my career.