

Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: Morgan Lewis' Grace Speights

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Grace E. Speights is a partner in Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP's labor and employment practice, managing partner of the Washington, D.C., office, chairwoman of the systemic employment litigation practice, and co-chairwoman of the firm's diversity committee. She focuses her practice on counseling and defending clients in connection with employment discrimination claims, primarily those involving class claims, and on counseling clients regarding best practices for corporate diversity initiatives.

Prior to joining the labor and employment practice, Speights was an associate and partner in the firm's litigation practice, where she focused on employment discrimination litigation, employee benefits litigation, and insurance coverage litigation. She has litigation and trial experience in federal courts nationwide and in the District of Columbia's local courts.

Speights is active in bar association activities and has served as an officer in several associations in the Washington area. She also serves as a member of the District of Columbia Judicial Nominations Commission. In addition, she served for six years as a member of the District of Columbia Court of Appeals Committee on Admissions and the District of Columbia Commission on Judicial Tenure and Disabilities. In September 2014, she was the first woman from Morgan Lewis to be inducted into the American College of Trial Lawyers.

As a participant in Law360's Minority Powerbrokers Q&A series, Speights shared her perspective on five questions:

Q: How did you break the glass ceiling in the legal industry?

A: I drew upon the lessons I learned in childhood: Hard work, dedication and perseverance. I grew up poor and in a tough neighborhood in Philadelphia. I learned the value of hard work at an early age, watching my mother head off to her job in a factory every day to put food on our table. When I got the privilege to attend law school, do a federal court clerkship and then join a large firm, I jumped at the opportunity. I also had the help of strong mentors and sponsors in the firm. That is how I broke the glass ceiling in the legal industry.



Grace E. Speights

Q: What are the challenges of being a lawyer of color at a senior level?

A: There are many challenges of being a lawyer of color at a senior level, but a few immediately come to mind. As a senior lawyer of color at the firm, I feel that I have a duty to make sure that I mentor and sponsor associates of color at the firm. Because there are only so many senior lawyers of color at the firm, mentoring and sponsoring requires a great deal of my time — which is a challenge when you also have tremendous client responsibilities, management responsibilities, community and civic related responsibilities, and you also have to manage your personal life and family. Developing business is also a challenge. Although there have been many initiatives involving efforts by major companies to direct business to diverse partners at law firms, most of those initiatives have not been successful.

Q: Describe a time you encountered discrimination in your career and tell us how you handled it.

A: Throughout my career, and as recently as last week, in many courthouses I have been mistaken for a court reporter, administrative support or a party to a case. The only way to deal with that is to correct the person who makes that mistake, on the spot. Several times I have suggested that the person should work hard to eliminate this kind of stereotyping. I have also felt excluded, or that my suggestions and opinions have not been respected, in meetings at other law firms that are not as diverse as Morgan Lewis or which do not have senior lawyers of color on their teams. In such instances, I make sure to continue expressing my opinions confidently and without hesitation. It is particularly gratifying when my views and opinions are validated by clients or other senior lawyers in the meeting.

Q: What advice would you give to a lawyer of color?

A: I have a number of suggestions for lawyers of color trying to make it in the legal profession: Work hard; always turn in work product that is nothing short of excellent in quality and is on time; be thick-skinned; be a team player; go the extra mile; don't ever doubt yourself; find mentors and sponsors early in your career; don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it; ask questions to make sure you know what is expected of you; invest in yourself and make sure that you put your destiny in your own hands; and associate with a strong substantive practice area that is valued at your firm.

Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase diversity in its partner ranks?

A: Upper management of law firms must be committed to the concepts of diversity and inclusion to ensure that diverse lawyers have an equal chance at being successful. If upper management does not serve as a role model on this journey, it will be impossible for lawyers and partners in the lower ranks of the organization to be invested in the concepts of diversity and inclusion. Too often the responsibility for diversity and inclusion falls on the shoulders of diverse partners in the firm, who should not have to shoulder this responsibility alone. Stand-alone diversity and inclusion initiatives that are not embedded into all aspects of firm life don't really work. Diversity and inclusion must be considered and evaluated in hiring, assignments, training, client opportunities, business and leadership development opportunities, evaluations, promotions, pitch teams and every other aspect of firm life and operations.

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