

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Morgan Lewis' Grace Speights

Law360, New York (November 27, 2013, 1:17 PM ET) -- Grace Speights has practiced at Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP for nearly 30 years, where she became the firm's first female African-American partner in 1991. She is the Washington, D.C., office managing partner and deputy leader of the labor and employment practice, where she focuses on employment discrimination cases, primarily those involving class claims, as well as corporate diversity counseling. She handles employment discrimination class actions and defends claims of discrimination in public accommodations. She also has an active pro bono practice.

She recently won the NAACP's Champion of Justice Award. Speights is active in bar association activities and has served as president of the Greater Washington Area Chapter Women Lawyers Division of the National Bar Association. 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.

Q: How did you break into what many consider to be an old boys' network?

A: I'm not a person who lets obstacles — real or perceived — stand in her way. I grew up in South Philadelphia in a single-parent home. I learned the value of hard work at an early age, watching my mother head off to her job in a factory every day. I was the first in my family to go to college, let alone law school. So when it came time for me to build my own career, I drew upon the lessons I learned in childhood: hard work, dedication and perseverance. Although I entered a male-dominated profession, I never let that fact deter me. I put my all into my practice and made it a point to be the best lawyer I could be. I was also fortunate to have strong male mentors at the firm.

Q: What are the challenges of being a woman at a senior level within a law firm?

A: Being the first African-American female partner at Morgan Lewis brought certain pressures. There were expectations that I was the trailblazer for others. My philosophy has always been that you cannot let yourself be intimidated. I earned my place in the senior leadership of the firm. Again, maybe it is my background — I learned to hold my own in many situations where I had no experience and went beyond my imagination as a young child. I did this by observing, always being prepared, and learning from each situation.

Q: Describe a time you encountered sexism in your career and how you handled it.

A: There have been many occasions when I have been mistaken for a court reporter, administrative support or a party to a case. I have attended meetings at other law firms that are not as diverse as Morgan Lewis or do not have senior women lawyers, and I have not been treated as equal to the senior men from such firms in attendance at the meeting.

I once had an opposing counsel comment on my appearance during the course of a hearing on a motion for preliminary injunction in a federal court in a Midwestern town, implying that I was attractive in appearance but that my argument was weak. At the end of the hearing, the judge called all counsel up to the bench, where he proceeded to chastise opposing counsel for his comments and required opposing counsel to send an apology letter to me with a copy to the judge. You just have to learn to keep calm and focus on your case and your client.

Q: What advice would you give to an aspiring female attorney?

A: I would give female and male attorneys the same advice: Dedicate yourself to your practice, don't let challenges become burdens, and enjoy what you do. Take advantage of the opportunities presented to you, develop strong mentoring relationships, and give back in your professional and personal life. Women (and attorneys of color) reach out to me all the time, and I make a big effort to connect with those people seeking my advice. I speak a lot to college and law school organizations to tell my story and offer my perspective on how to develop a satisfying career.

For female attorneys who are parents (indeed, this is also applicable to male attorneys who are parents), my advice is to figure out the right balance for your family. Very few people can do it all. You have to have a strong support network, but you also have to know when to let go. I was there for my kids, attending their activities and being active in their schools. But I let certain things go. I was not the mom who baked the treats for school — I bought them. I knew how much time I had and how to prioritize. I also gave up a lot of sleep over the years. I think women (and parents generally) have to go into the legal profession with eyes wide open, and be realistic about the right balance for you and your family.

Developing a strong network with other women professionals is also important. It's invigorating to work with other successful women. And, it's supportive because you have peers to relate to who can offer advice when you need it. For example, there is not a week that goes by that I don't discuss personal or professional issues and seek advice from my law school roommate, Donna Hill Staton, who is my best friend and confidante.

Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase the number of women in the partner ranks?

A: Firms have to be open to change. The old model of one spouse working and the other spouse staying home has not been the reality for a long time. Firms need to continue to adjust the model so they can adapt to the changing needs of their lawyers. I think we've done a very good job of that at Morgan Lewis. When I started, there were very few women partners, let alone senior partners who were working mothers. Now we have many women in leadership positions, including our chairwoman-elect.

Law firms should also foster a culture where mentoring junior lawyers is valued. We are all so busy with client work that it's easy to have the excuse that there is no time to mentor. I look back at my first formal assigned mentor at the firm, Mark Dichter, and all he did for me. Mark had an incredibly busy practice, but he still took time to reach out to me and make sure I was finding my way at the firm. I try to do the same for junior lawyers whom I work with.

Finally, I encourage firms to look at business development coaching for women and men. There have been recent articles that the business development techniques necessary to sell to women are different than those needed to sell to men. Maybe because of my practice focus on diversity issues, I am keenly aware of these differences. With more women in senior leadership roles in legal departments, firms need to be sensitive to this issue and make it an aspect of their business development coaching for partners.

Q: Outside your firm, name an attorney you admire and tell us why.

A: Justice Sonia Sotomayor. I recently read her book "My Beloved World" and really identified with and felt her story because our backgrounds growing up were very similar. Despite having grown up in material poverty and being raised by a single mom, she has reached the highest rank in the legal community. She attributes a great deal of her success to the things she experienced in her childhood, which gave her strength and an optimism that was stronger than any adversity that she confronted growing up. Her story should serve as an inspiration to young minority students who grow up in poverty (and women lawyers) that they should not let adversity and challenges stand in their way.

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the firm, its clients, or Portfolio Media Inc., or any of its or their respective affiliates. This article is for general information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.

All Content © 2003-2013, Portfolio Media, Inc.