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& THE BAR

May/June 2011

## POWERING UP

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of Minority Managing Partners

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# POWERING

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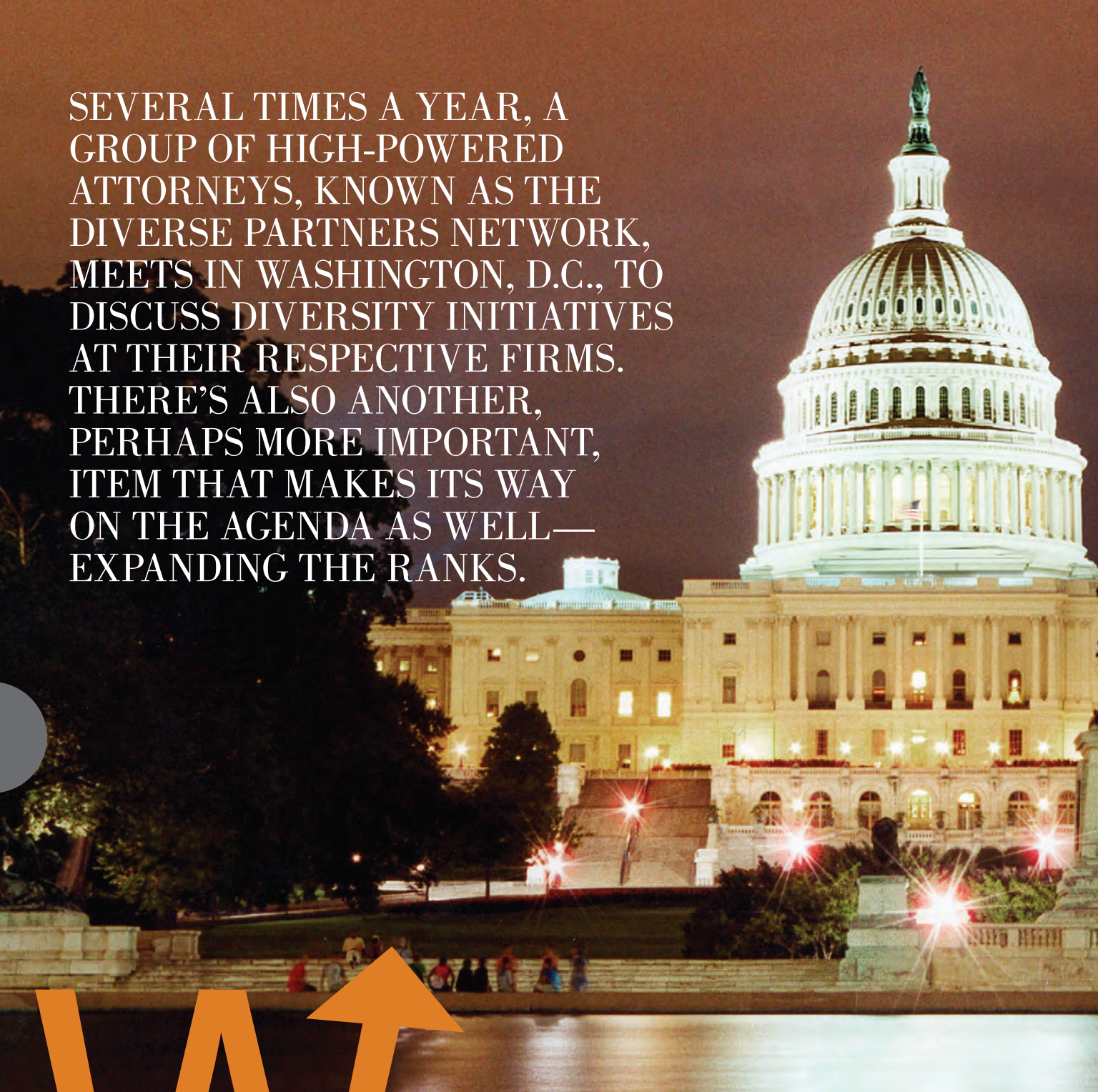




## A LOOK AT THE FIRST GENERATION OF MINORITY MANAGING PARTNERS

BY CHANA GARCIA





SEVERAL TIMES A YEAR, A GROUP OF HIGH-POWERED ATTORNEYS, KNOWN AS THE DIVERSE PARTNERS NETWORK, MEETS IN WASHINGTON, D.C., TO DISCUSS DIVERSITY INITIATIVES AT THEIR RESPECTIVE FIRMS. THERE'S ALSO ANOTHER, PERHAPS MORE IMPORTANT, ITEM THAT MAKES ITS WAY ON THE AGENDA AS WELL—EXPANDING THE RANKS.

**W**ith 20 or so members, the men and women who live and practice in the nation's capital are part of an exclusive club: managing partners of color. Almost all of them are the first nonwhite persons at their firms to hold such a prestigious title, a fact that underscores both the advances being made within the legal profession and the languid pace at which it changes.

Despite their small numbers, these partners see opportunity within their grasp. As stewards of their firms, they're in a powerful position to drive the overall vision of their practices, in addition to setting the tone around diversity and inclusion. And as U.S. firms look to gain an edge in an increasingly global business community, African





Grace Speights, John Daniels Jr.,  
Anthony Pierce, and Benjamin Wilson

American managing partners are finding that their spheres of influence are far-reaching and more relevant than ever.

Benjamin F. Wilson, managing principal at Beveridge & Diamond, P.C., in Washington, D.C., says, historically only about 30 people of color have held positions as managing partners of majority-owned firms. “Now we have about 20 to 22 who are actively doing the job all over the country.

“Many of us met during the 2010 Congressional Black Caucus weekend, and it was a great opportunity to talk about

business development, about issues affecting women of color in law firms, and other common concerns that we share.

A number of us knew one another, and one or two of us meet informally, but this was our first official meeting as the African American Managing Partners Network. We’re in our fourth year, and now our goal is to meet at different events during the course of the year—whether at an American Bar Association event or a CBC event—where we might have our own agenda, and that’s working well for us.”





### WHO SAID IT'S LONELY AT THE TOP?

For Wilson, whose practice encompasses commercial and environmental litigation, organizing colleagues near and far allows members of this close-knit network to make the most of their professional contacts. They refer clients to one another, stay abreast of important events, and discuss the unique set of challenges affecting diverse attorneys.


"We attempted to organize in the past, but we were unable to sustain it. What's different this time around is that everyone is there to help, so it didn't become a one-person job," says Wilson, who is also a founding member of the broader Diverse Partners Network, an organization that focuses on partners of all ethnic backgrounds. "We're looking less for a messiah and more to collaborate for change. Each of us takes turns heading up various programs. Five or six times a year, we have programs for summer associates. We had a program for new partners. We also identified a number of women partners to be dynamic leaders in our group."

One of those dynamic women leaders is Grace Speights, a partner in Morgan, Lewis & Bockius' labor and employment practice and managing partner of the firm's Washington, D.C., office. A self-proclaimed "lifer" at the firm, Speights joined Morgan Lewis in 1984 as an associate. She rose up through the ranks, serving in various leadership and management roles, and was made partner in 1991. Over the years, she says she's seen the number of partners of color increase slowly but steadily. She credits affinity networks such as those established for women and people of color as a key component to sustaining diversity within the legal field—and at the critical partner level, where women attorneys and attorneys of color are disproportionately underrepresented.

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**— JOHN DANIELS JR.**



A portrait of Grace Speights, a Black woman with short dark hair, smiling. She is wearing a grey blazer over a white collared shirt and large hoop earrings. The background is a warm-toned wall with vertical panels. A door with the number '2' is visible on the left.

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"It can be very difficult for women when you're talking about diversity, and then you add color to that—it's challenging. You're still one of a few if not the only one at your firm," says Speights, who was recently awarded the Charlotte E. Ray Trailblazer Award by the National Bar Association's Greater Washington Area Chapter. "When I was coming along as an associate, for a long time I was the only African American lawyer in the office, and I often relied on people outside of the firm for reality checks. And I was fortunate. I had good mentors within the firm. I had partners who took an interest in me, and that's a big part of the reason why I've been so successful. But you look around and there's not a lot that you have in common with a lot of people. Fortunately, there were some African American partners at other firms who I could reach out to and ask questions, and they were a big help to me."

#### MOVING THE FIRM FORWARD

Regardless of their race, ethnicity, or gender, managing partners are selected for the skills and expertise they bring to a firm, as well as their ability to lead the attorneys who make up their staff. If you ask Anthony Pierce, partner in charge of the Washington, D.C., office of Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld, there's a fine line between doing it right and getting it all wrong. Although the recognition that comes from such a notable position is enviable, Pierce says managing partners have to balance meeting clients' expectations with setting a strategic direction within their firms, all while producing tangible results. The challenges they face as partners of color have to take second place to the larger needs of the firm.

"You should be known for your practice of law, not your management role," Pierce says. "Clients don't hire you to manage; clients hire you to practice law. My view and my goal,





Bill Lee is the fifth managing partner in the 100-year history of WilmerHale. He is the first Asian American managing partner at his firm but sees a generational shift that will bring more minorities and women into the profession.

### How has your firm supported you in your managerial role?

**BL:** The most critical thing that the firm did was put together a management group. The assistant managing partner, the committee chairman, and the executive committee were extremely supportive. The second thing they did was allow me to adapt a management style that allowed me to practice more than half my time and that was very important.

### Have you noticed more minorities entering the legal profession over the course of your career?

**BL:** There is a tremendously greater number. When I arrived in Boston in 1976, I was the only Chinese American lawyer in the city. Today, there are literally hundreds. There's a change of national proportion and that's been a very good thing.

### What are some obstacles to diversity in the legal profession?

**BL:** The challenges are not dissimilar to those many professions face, which is, whether you like it or not, stereotypes still exist. For instance, stereotypes that remain of Asians are that they are very smart but not visionaries or leaders. The stereotypes are being broken down every day but it takes time.

### What advice would you give an aspiring minority attorney?

**BL:** I would give a minority attorney the same advice I would give a young white male attorney: You have to do very good work. You have to work hard and deliver good results to clients efficiently and effectively. Build relationships within your firm and outside your firm that allow you to assume leadership roles.

### As a minority attorney, do you feel like you bring something extra to the table?

**BL:** I think that everybody, whether you're a person of color or not, brings something special to the table by virtue of their background. What I bring to the table isn't the fact that I'm Chinese, but I think more so the manner in which my family raised me.



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**— BENJAMIN WILSON**





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**— ANTHONY PIERCE**

which I think is important to tell other folks who may come into these jobs, is that you want to continue practicing law. You don't want to let the management task overwhelm your practice. I see that as a big danger. If I thought my practice suffered in anyway because of my management role, I wouldn't do the management role."

It's a sentiment shared by John Daniels Jr., chairman of Quarles & Brady in Milwaukee. Daniels is one of a handful of attorneys of color nationwide to occupy the top spot at his firm. He says that above all, a managing partner of color must strive to be an exceptional managing partner. And for young attorneys of color hoping to one day make partner or managing partner, he has a simple piece of advice: Don't seek out the management roles. Instead,

Daniels says, work hard and the recognition will come.

"My path to chair of the firm has really involved my going from an associate of the firm and then to partner and then taking on other leadership roles," Daniels said. "I went through all the major functions of the firm. But frankly speaking, I'm a client guy. I wake up and go to sleep focusing on how I can drive the interests of clients, and that has been the thing that has distinguished my career. You've got to be able to create value for your colleagues in the enterprise, and you've got to be able to create value for the people you're going to serve. There's no road map, but ultimately what partners and clients want is to see a person who provides value and good judgment." **D&B**