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State Department–Fortune partnership brings Kenyan lawyer to Morgan Lewis

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As the head of one of the nation's 10 largest law firms, Morgan Lewis Chairwoman Jami McKeon spends much of her time traveling to meet with lawyers, staff and clients in its 30 offices in the U.S., Europe, Asia and the Middle East. But for the past four years, the world has come to her.

As part of a public-private partnership between the U.S. Department of State and Fortune's Most Powerful Women, McKeon is currently hosting Carol Kariuki, a lawyer from Kenya who has her own consulting business. This year, the international exchange program paired 16 senior women executives in the United States with emerging leaders from 13 countries to advance the status of women in business. In addition to business and leadership skills, the four-week program is designed to equip participants with expanded networks and inspires them to serve their communities back home.

During the program, called U.S. Department of State Global Women's Mentoring Partnership, Kariuki has shadowed McKeon and met with other firm leaders to learn more about business development, financial planning in law firm management and effective networking.

McKeon said she is passionate about women's empowerment across the world. She and the firm have hosted women from Ghana, Vietnam and El Salvador in the three previous years.

"It's just exciting to meet emerging women leaders from other countries," McKeon said. "I've stayed in touch with all of them and they are doing amazing things in their countries."

McKeon said in addition to herself and some of the firm's other lawyers, Kariuki has spent time with members of the firm's finance, human resources, e-discovery, marketing and information technology departments to learn about all aspects of the firm's massive, global operation.

"One of the great things about a firm like ours is that we can tailor each training program toward the individual," McKeon said. "In Carol's case, she's involved in consulting on so many different areas of operation, it just made sense to connect her with everyone. She's especially interested in learning about new technology, so she can take in back to her clients in Kenya."

Kariuki's agenda differs from that of Marjorie Chorro de Trigueros, who visited a few years ago from El Salvador and was interested in learning more about the American justice system rather than law firm operations.

In addition to spending time in Morgan Lewis' Philadelphia headquarters, Kariuki will also travel to the firm's New York and Washington, D.C., offices.

When it came time for a one-on-one conversation, McKeon said Kariuki was interested in learning why Morgan Lewis does not yet have an office in Africa and if it had plans to add one to its footprint which covers the U.S., Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

"I told her that Africa is an area of the world we are watching closely, but we don't have any current plans," McKeon said.

The answer to Kariuki's question is a complicated one, as many countries in Africa have unstable governments and growing economies that might not have enough work for a firm like Morgan Lewis to plant its flag there. Some countries, including Kenya, do not permit foreign law firms to open offices there, so Kariuki said they wind up forming alliances with Kenyan firms.

While none of the firm's 30 offices are located in Africa, the firm has



inch closer as its international reach has expanded significantly over the past decade.

In 2013, Morgan Lewis opened an office in Dubai in 2013 with the addition of a team from Vinson & Elkins that handles structured finance and debt capital markets practice in the Middle East region and possesses particular knowledge of Islamic finance. The firm does not practice under UAE law, rather it will be handling mainly international transactions under U.S. and U.K. law.

"It was no surprise to me that Morgan Lewis was not in Africa, but I wanted some perspective from a global firm," Kariuki said. "It's sort of like Shark Tank. A company will come in saying it was making \$500,000 [in revenue] and then [after getting a deal] they are making \$2 million. It's a business. And if someone is going to invest in yours, they need to have a good reason."

Kariuki, who specializes in assisting law firms and legal departments to streamline their business operations, practiced law in Kenya for a number of years before deciding to become a consultant nine years ago. In addition to her law degree, she earned a masters degree in finance online from the University of Denver in 2016, juggling her studies and business with raising her family.

In Kenya, a large law firm would consist of 20 partners and 50 or more associates, but Kariuki said the average size is about three to five partners and five to 15 associates.

Kariuki said she applied for the program after a friend who had participated last year recommended it. Participants do not learn with which companies they are being matched until shortly before they arrive.

"All of the companies are outstanding, but I feel very fortunate to have been put with Morgan Lewis and Jami," Kariuki said. "I want to learn more about serving law firms and she is a great business woman. It's great to see all of the effort that goes into running this firm."

She said she came into the program with an open mind after working with law firms for the past 15 years.

"What I really enjoyed learning was how the firm leverages technology to make the firm run more efficiently," Kariuki said. "I love technology and from that perspective, this has been very instructive."

Kariuki said what she learned most from McKeon was the importance of hiring a capable team.

"If you are running an organization, you want to surround yourself with people who know the business better than you," Kariuki said. "If I didn't [have a staff back in Kenya], I couldn't spend five weeks here."