

Rainmaker Q&A: Morgan Lewis' Grace Speights

Law360, New York (August 12, 2013, 2:04 PM ET) -- Grace E. Speights is managing partner of Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP's Washington, D.C., office. A self-described "lifer" she has been at Morgan Lewis for nearly 30 years, where she became the firm's first female, African American partner in 1991.

Speights is the 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 has handled many employment discrimination class action cases, and has also defended several cases involving claims of discrimination in public accommodations. She also has a very active pro bono practice. Her work has earned her numerous awards and recognition, including most recently the NAACP's Champion of Justice Award.

In addition to her own hard work, Speights is quick to acknowledge the importance of good mentors throughout her career, and as a result, she encourages investing time in mentoring students and junior lawyers. She is very 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 become a rainmaker?

A: Hard work. Especially in the legal field you have to work hard, and I've been doing 14- to 16-hour days for a long time. I grew up in a pretty poor neighborhood. My mom worked in a drapery factory folding fiberglass draperies. She came home every day itching from all the fiberglass. She understood the value of hard work and always said that I had no choice but to be tough and that I had to do better than she had done. I think there were things I had to struggle with that not everyone else necessarily had to. South Philadelphia was a rough place to grow up, and when I was growing up there I often had to dodge bullets going to and from the neighborhood recreation center because of ongoing gang warfare.

I think another aspect is that, when I was coming up as a young lawyer, there were not many other female lawyers of color in major firms. I was lucky to have partners at Morgan Lewis who took an interest in me and wanted to invest in me. I was one of two African American associates at that time in 1984, and the firm chair made it clear that he wanted to see us do well at Morgan Lewis. His encouragement along with the advice I was able to receive in confidence from Gerri Brawner, the only African America partner at the firm back then, inspired me from the very beginning of my legal career. My formal assigned mentor at the firm, Mark Dichter, who was a partner in the labor and employment group at that time, also served as a tremendous mentor and resource. He took his mentoring role seriously and would reach out often to make sure that I was finding my way in the firm.

And as I grew in my career, I remained fortunate and had strong mentors who showed me the ropes. For instance, Bill Gardner, who was the head of the litigation practice group in the Washington office, was a mentor in my early days at the firm. He was instrumental in helping me to develop clients by putting me out there in front of clients early in my career. He later transferred many of those relationships to me once I became a partner in the litigation practice. George Stohner, a partner in the labor and employment practice helped me in the same way when I moved into that practice, and Mark Dichter got me involved in outside labor and employment activities like the ABA Labor and Employment Section, the American Employment Law Council, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Committee of the ABA. That really helped me get my name out there as a labor and employment lawyer when I was still new to it.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention fun as one of the components here. I think you should enjoy what you're doing even if it's difficult and have fun while doing it. You can ask my associates if it's true, but I like to think that I'm an easygoing person who always has a smile and likes to laugh.

Q: How do you stay a rainmaker?

A: Hard work, again! But also being able to build and maintain good relationships with people and work well with others. I think one of my greatest strengths is actually my people skills. Some of that comes from my background and where I grew up and some of it just comes from being a mother. Often, I'm in a position where I'm just trying to get people to play nice, whether it's my kids or parties that are at odds in a case. There are different ways to approach this, but I find that in the cases and matters I handle often my style is to be the "good cop." Regardless of what kind of interpersonal style suits you best, in terms of both cases and management, in the end it's about taking varying — sometimes opposing — opinions and bringing them together to make some kind of consensus.

Q: What advice would you give to an aspiring rainmaker?

A: I wouldn't be where I am today if other people hadn't helped me and invested in me along the way. I'll give you an example. In March of 1975, I was finishing up at the Philadelphia High School for Girls where I had done very well, and I had applied for many scholarships because I was planning to attend a small state university in Pennsylvania. I was invited to a luncheon of a local organization to accept a scholarship award that I was going to receive from the organization. At that luncheon, my mother and I were seated at the lunch table with someone on the board of the organization who also happened to be a partner at a major law firm in Philadelphia. When he found out where I was planning to go to school he was shocked. He asked my mother for our telephone number, gave me and my mother his card, and by Monday of the next week I was in an interview at the University of Pennsylvania, which is where I eventually attended on a full scholarship. There's a certain amount of luck involved in becoming successful, but in my case it was also being fortunate enough to meet people who wanted to mentor me.

So I would say to anyone that, as I said before, you have to put in the work. You need to lead by example and show people that you're going to add value. Doing that puts you in a good position to be ready when those moments arise. It also means that once you're in a position to mentor other people, you need to take time to do it.

Q: Tell us a tale of landing a big client.

A: Recently, I landed a very significant matter that came to me out of the blue. I was sitting in a restaurant in Manhattan about to have lunch at the start of what I thought was going to be a relaxing and exciting five-day getaway to New York. I had plans to attend a few shows on Broadway, do several long runs through Central Park, and go dining and dancing on a cruise down the Hudson. Just as I sat down at the table I checked my phone and saw that I had a message: “need your help on a new matter; time sensitive!” Needless to say, that long relaxing getaway evaporated very quickly.

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