

In The News

Female Powerbroker Q&A: Munsch Hardt's Deborah Perry

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Deborah Perry is a shareholder in Munsch Hardt Kopf & Harr PC's insolvency, restructuring and creditors' rights practice group in Dallas. She represents debtors, committees of unsecured creditors, trustees, post-confirmation trusts, and individual creditors in bankruptcy cases and litigation related thereto. Her practice spans many different industries with an emphasis on health care, retail and restaurant cases. She has particular experience representing committees of unsecured creditors in bankruptcy cases, as well as prosecuting claims against former directors and officers of insolvent companies.

Perry has served as the shareholder liaison to the firm's management committee and as the co-chairwoman of the firm's recruiting committee. She is a member of the advisory board of the Litigation Counsel of America, an honorary trial lawyer society, as well as being a member of its Trial Law Institute and Complex Commercial Litigation Institute.

Q: HOW DID YOU BREAK INTO WHAT MANY CONSIDER TO BE AN OLD BOYS' NETWORK?

A: As a young lawyer, I never considered the legal field to be an old boys' network. While that may have been naive, I think it stood me in good stead because I assumed I belonged, always acted that way, and as a result have been treated like a member of the "network."

The foregoing being said, I was recently reminded of how my area of practice is still largely male-dominated when The Wall Street Journal ran an article last year titled "Detroit Bankruptcy Lawyers Break Glass Ceiling — Female Attorneys on Both Sides of Case Stand Out in Male-Dominated Field," after the filing of the bankruptcy for the city of Detroit. The fact that this was newsworthy is disappointing but also a reminder that in the legal profession we must be vigilant to continue to work to close the gender gap at the highest levels.

Q: WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF BEING A WOMAN AT A SENIOR LEVEL WITHIN A LAW FIRM?

A: Generally, I think the challenges of being a woman at a senior level in a law firm are no different than those of being a man at a senior level in a law firm. The legal market is constantly shifting and has changed monumentally in the last five years with the downward shift in the world economy. Regardless of how long you have practiced law you have to always embrace the capacity to change. There is no resting on your laurels per se. You cannot become complacent when it comes to obtaining business and maintaining client relationships.

Q: DESCRIBE A TIME YOU ENCOUNTERED SEXISM IN YOUR CAREER AND TELL US HOW YOU HANDLED IT.

A: As a second-year lawyer I attended a meeting of creditors where I represented one of the major constituencies. At the end of the meeting, the debtor's counsel, an older gentleman, approached me and said, "Tell Mr. Richardson [the partner on the case] that he has a mighty pretty assistant." I smiled at him, told him I sure would and then proceeded to handle the case professionally and zealously. While this was a sexist

comment, I recognized it as something that would not affect my career and moved on. Sexism that will impact a career should of course be dealt with swiftly, but for whatever reason, I have rarely encountered overt sexism in my career.

Q: WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO AN ASPIRING FEMALE ATTORNEY?

A: I have always considered myself to be an attorney who happens to be female rather than a female attorney. A subtle distinction but one that I think is important when it comes to the mindset that you take in your career. Strive to be the best lawyer you can be, not the best female lawyer you can be.

As a female attorney, if your goal is to make partner in your firm, you should make it clear to your supervisors that that is in fact your goal. I believe sometimes it is assumed because you are a woman you may want to go part-time if you have children or you may not be interested in partnership. If you want to make partner, I recommend you be very clear about it from the start of your career and reiterate it.

Do not take things personally. Many times someone is having a bad day because of something that has nothing to do with you. Do not take it personally, just move on.

Do not fall into the trap of having it all. Recognize no one, male or female ever “has it all,” all of the time. Figure out what motivates you and brings you professional and personal satisfaction and strive to attain equilibrium in those areas.

Take credit for your accomplishments. In order for you to advance people need to know what you have achieved. You have to tell them. No one else is going to do it for you.

Q: WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A LAW FIRM LOOKING TO INCREASE THE NUMBER OF WOMEN IN ITS PARTNER RANKS?

A: I think it is essential to train female attorneys to be good business developers from the moment they start with a firm. Sometimes men and women have different strengths in this area and firms need to determine what those strengths are to help their attorneys capitalize on them.

Solicit input from the female attorneys in your firm on major issues. Because women are underrepresented in equity partner ranks, management committee ranks and compensation committee ranks frequently there is little to no female voice on significant issues. Find ways to obtain that input and I believe you will see rewards in the retention of women in your firm.

Q: OUTSIDE YOUR FIRM, NAME AN ATTORNEY YOU ADMIRE AND TELL US WHY.

A: I admire Gerald Powell [of Baylor Law School], my evidence professor and mock trial coach in law school. He saw potential in me that I had yet to see in myself at the time which I consider to be a hallmark of a good mentor. Gerry is the consummate gentleman and a Renaissance man in his pursuit of the law and history. He taught me the art of zealous advocacy tempered with absolute civility.

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