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Women in the Law



BE THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE: Perspectives of Women Leaders in the Law

More women than ever are graduating from law school, but the practice remains different for women in many ways. Given those differences, we sought advice from a group of women attorneys with diverse practice areas and backgrounds who have excelled in their respective professional careers to discuss their experiences and offer their insights. We are grateful for their candid perspectives, and we are confident our readers will be equally appreciative. The full transcript of their responses, including answers on the topics of how women can best advocate for themselves and the effects of the pandemic, can be found on *The Houston Lawyer* page of hba.org.



Ashley M. Kleber is the Co-Managing Partner at Gibbs & Bruns LLP, a litigation boutique engaged exclusively

in high-stakes business and commercial litigation. She focuses her practice on complex commercial litigation, and her experience spans a diverse array of areas, including financial, securities, energy,

oil & gas, trade secret, and private client matters.



Tammy W. Brennig is the Houston Managing Partner at Hunton Andrews Kurth LLP, a full-service law

firm with over 900 lawyers in the United States, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East in more than 100 distinct areas of practice. She has an extensive practice that includes representation of financial institutions, institutional investors, and corporate borrowers in all types of secured and unsecured financing transactions.



S. Priya Coffey is the Managing Partner at Jackson Walker LLP, a full-service law firm with over 400 attorneys

in seven offices throughout Texas. Her practice focuses on complex commercial real estate transactions, including the representation of buyers and sellers in the acquisition and disposition of land, office buildings and retail centers, and the representation of landlords and tenants in commercial office building lease and retail lease transactions.

As a managing partner, how have you been able to effect change in your firm to not only attract, but retain, talented younger attorneys?

AMK: I try to share my own story with the candidates coming through our recruiting process. When I joined the firm as a new associate, I was asked very early on to take depositions, argue at hearings, and interact directly with clients. These opportunities were not presented in a sink-or-swim way. Other lawyers took the time to share practice tips and talk to me about strategy. I see that same support being poured into our

new lawyers today, and I want our recruits to know that's what they can expect if they come to G&B.

I also think this is a key factor in retention. Our younger lawyers are eager to do substantive and challenging work, and it is our responsibility to make sure they get those opportunities. We typically staff cases with very lean teams, which means our new associates get frontline experience and work directly with senior partners from the start. They also get to work on a wide range of cases. As a result, our younger lawyers tend to stay engaged.

TWB: In my experience, talented lawyers are drawn to firms with mentorship opportunities, and these opportunities should be communicated as early as possible. Usually, this means during on-campus interviews and throughout the summer associate/hiring process. As a result, it is important for women—both at the associate and partner level—to be involved in a firm's hiring process and to mentor young attorneys throughout their summer associate program and first years of practice. It is also important that mentorship leads to sponsorship. As women progress toward partnership, they need sponsors—both men and women—to promote them within an organization. Sponsors create the visibility needed and provide added credibility as a woman is rising through the ranks at a firm. In our experience at Hunton Andrews Kurth, emphasizing a culture that places mentorship, sponsorship, and associate development at the center of an associate's early training develops a deep, mutual commitment between both the firm and the lawyer. We also have several firmwide programs in place that promote retention of women lawyers, including Oneness Luncheons, women's office-based mentor circles, and our Mentor Her program.

What are the greatest advantages you have witnessed when firms increase the number of women and people of color in leadership roles?

AMK: Having women and people of color

in leadership roles demonstrates that there is a path for lawyers of all backgrounds to succeed. That has been an important part of our firm's culture from the start. In 1983, Robin Gibbs founded our firm (f/k/a Gibbs & Ratliff) with Debbie Ratliff—at a time when female trial lawyers were rare. When I joined G&B, it wasn't lost on me that the firm had excellent female attorneys at every level of seniority. Kathy Patrick was at the helm of multi-billion dollar cases and making national headlines. Andi Gulley and Ayesha Najam (among others) were leading case teams and taking active roles in hearings, depositions, and client meetings. Seeing women and people of color in these roles makes it easier for lawyers who come next to envision their own success.

PC: When a law firm is intentional about diversifying leadership, that firm benefits from having a range of perspectives that can help reshape policies. For example, a woman often has a very different viewpoint on maternity leave from a man. So, when a woman serves in a leadership role within her firm, she can bring a completely different perspective on how to handle parental leave. I am proud to work at a firm that is being intentional about adding more women and people of color among leadership and at the partnership level. We still have a way to go, but we are aware and are consciously working on it.

What systemic barriers or biases, if any, have you encountered or witnessed as a woman lawyer? What stressors do you think disproportionately impact the advancement of woman lawyers today, and how can we help them?

AMK: A huge challenge for many female lawyers is balancing the demands of career and family. Because many firms have a 7+ year partnership track, the timing of having children often coincides with a critical time in a woman's legal career. Navigating pregnancy and then caring for young children—all while trying to make partner or build a book of business—can be daunting.

I think it is important for firms to take a long-term view of what their women law-

yers bring to the table. I remember telling one of my partners, Barrett Reasoner, that I would be out on maternity leave during an important stage in one of our cases. He said, "We will be fine around here. Our goal is to have you happily practicing with us for the long term, and that is more likely if you have gotten the time you'd like to have with your son." That feedback meant the world to me. It also made sense for the firm. The last thing we want is to lose talented lawyers. Providing women lawyers the support and flexibility they need in the short term makes it more likely that they will be with us for many years to come.

TWB: I am blessed to have worked at firms that recognize the benefits of hiring women, but I was not immune to the barriers that have inundated our profession. In my early years of practice as a litigator, I was often mistaken for the court reporter in depositions because I was the only female in the room. I was called "Little Lady" in the courtroom by opposing counsel and judges, and if a male colleague was appearing in court with me, opposing counsel and often the judge would direct questions or responses to him rather than to me, even when I was taking lead on the case.

By the time I transitioned to a transactional practice, women had made strides in the business world, but certain barriers still existed. The business world is still largely dominated by men, and it's human nature to be drawn to people who look like you or have common interests or backgrounds. As a female, it can be tricky to build business relationships in male-dominated industries. We walk a fine line of trying to build a client relationship without being viewed as overstepping or sending the wrong message.

With clients and law firms recognizing the value that women bring to the table, there is proof that progress has definitely been made. However, women are often seen as the problem solvers, the doers, and the workers, rather than rainmakers. At times, we are tasked with getting the deal done, but don't have a seat at the table when the initial deal is made.

PC: Barriers that I have witnessed are women lawyers not being the first choice for leading matters or not being promoted to partnership or leadership. A related aspect of these systemic barriers is disparity in compensation and originations. And for women lawyers of color, well, that adds a whole other layer of complexity to these issues.

As a wife and mother first, and lawyer second, I can personally attest to feeling the pressure of “doing it all.” While a lot of responsibility is placed on lawyers to be adaptable, flexible, and always on call, as women, more pressure is placed on us to be on top of everything. Motherhood adds a whole new pressure because women must prepare for taking time off and then figuring out how to ramp back up. Motherhood adds unexpected situations, like sick children, requiring schedules having to be juggled. (Studies show these responsibilities still fall

disproportionately onto women.) We can help mitigate all these stressors by making women a regular part of the conversation and having lawyers share their stories so that male and female lawyers are better equipped to support one another.

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As a wife and mother first, and lawyer second, I can personally attest to feeling the pressure of ‘doing it all.’”

What advice would you give more senior attorneys who want to support younger female and diverse associates? In what ways have you been supported?

TWB: The best advice I can give is to get involved in your firm’s recruiting efforts from the ground up. Participation in mentorship activities at the summer associate level, and then again as a mentor to young associates, is the best way to support, attract, and retain strong, diverse talent. In addition, help younger female and diverse attorneys find sponsors within the firm, male and female, and cul-

tivate relationships with those sponsors. Sponsors are typically high-profile senior partners who can provide added support for promotions and partnership in the future. Beyond involvement in mentorship and sponsorship opportunities, it is important for more senior attorneys to create diverse teams of lawyers when pitching new business. Involving young females and diverse attorneys in the client-facing aspect of our business benefits both the client and the firm, from business development and training/mentorship standpoints.

PC: Senior attorneys must be willing to learn about their younger female and diverse associates, to empathetically listen to them, and to encourage the associates to be themselves. Developing trust is key in supporting such associates, so if they need help or have issues, they will come to the attorneys versus just leaving. Providing the space for younger lawyers to share their thoughts, opinions, and stories is empowering. So, to my fellow mentors out there, please encourage young lawyers to be




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themselves, to speak up, and advocate for themselves.

I've been lucky that so many people have supported me over the years at the firm, but one story stands out. The former managing partner of our entire firm, Mike Wilson, came to my office from Dallas when he understood that I was struggling to balance work/life the year I was up for partner and pregnant with my second child. We had an amazing conversation, and then a few weeks later, he convened a task force to create an alternative work schedule option. That pretty much sealed the deal for me regarding loyalty. So, to replicate such support on a systematic level, you need to find leaders who truly care about their people, who don't view themselves as better than everyone else, who will show up when you need them to have your back, and who are willing to make change even if that change is foreign to them or scares them. What I love about JW is we've always adapted and grown, and they let me be me. I never felt the need to conform to be someone I'm not.

Editor's Note

One of the attorneys *The Houston Lawyer* planned to profile in this article was **Ms. Zenobia Harris Bivens**, who passed away unexpectedly in January. Zenobia was a loving and dedicated wife and mother, and an incredible attorney who served as the Office Member-in-Charge at Frost Brown Todd. An accomplished trial and appellate lawyer, Zenobia won numerous jury verdicts and trial court decisions in civil and criminal cases (including a case in the Supreme Court of the United States), which led to her receiving many professional accolades, including recognition as a Texas Super Lawyers Rising Star and as a Top Woman Lawyer in Texas Monthly.

Zenobia was a true servant-leader who had a justice-informed approach to trial advocacy and cultivated spaces where everyone felt welcomed and appreciated. We dedicate this article in her memory and send thoughts of comfort to her family and friends.

We leave this powerful sentiment Zeno-

bia shared with us when we interviewed her for her profile. It captures her fierce spirit and unapologetic philosophy about how women lawyers should be their own cham-



pions:

"We should advocate for ourselves and be confident in doing so. If you think something is wrong, say it.

If you think that you are being overlooked for something, say it. At the same time, be discerning. You cannot fight every battle because there are so many. But when you do, make it count." 🏛️

Nikki Morris is an associate in the Litigation Group at BakerHostetler and a member of The Houston Lawyer editorial board.

Andrew Pearce is a shareholder and the Litigation Group chair at BoyarMiller. He is the Off-the-Record Editor for The Houston Lawyer.

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