

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Gibson Dunn's Helgi Walker

Law360, New York (March 24, 2014, 1:13 PM ET) -- Helgi Walker is a partner in Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP's Washington, D.C. office. She is a member of the firm's appellate and constitutional law group and the administrative law and regulatory practice group. Her practice focuses on appellate, regulatory and complex litigation matters. She has experience in appellate challenges to agency rulemakings, particularly in the telecommunications space, recently winning the "net neutrality" appeal for Verizon Communications Inc. in the D.C. Circuit.

Before entering private practice, she served as associate counsel to President George W. Bush, and as a law clerk to Justice Clarence Thomas on the U.S. Supreme Court and Judge J. Harvie Wilkinson III on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit. In 2011, *The National Law Journal* named her one of "Washington's Most Influential Women Lawyers."

Q: How did you break into what many consider to be an old boys' network?

A: Because my father is a lawyer, I never thought of law as an old boys' network — I thought of it as something my father did, and he never suggested there was any reason why I shouldn't consider doing it too. We just assumed that I could be a lawyer, if I wanted to be one. Accordingly, I never had a moment where I felt that I "broke into" the legal field; it's more like I grew into it. I realize how fortunate I am in this regard, as not all little girls have that kind of role model. But I did, and it made all the difference. In fact, social science shows that fathers can have a tremendously positive influence on the way that women think of themselves and what they believe themselves to be capable of doing.

Q: What are the challenges of being a woman at a senior level within a law firm?

A: They are much the same as for the senior men — thinking strategically about the health of the firm as an institution and, simultaneously, trying to be the best practitioner that you can be. Finding the time to take care of your responsibilities at home, on top of all that, can be challenging; my solution is to be realistic about scheduling — you just can't be in two places at once — so that I can really enjoy my personal time with family and friends.

Q: Describe a time you encountered sexism in your career and tell us how you handled it.

A: Recently, I was on a panel sponsored by the D.C. Circuit Historical Society about the history of women in the circuit, with trailblazers such as Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and former D.C. Circuit Chief Judge Pat Wald. Whenever I get a question like this, I think of them — they are the women who faced egregious sexism, not my generation. My own experience has been very different in that, throughout my legal career, my male colleagues and bosses have been true meritocrats who wouldn't have

dreamed of treating me differently because of my gender. And I know that's in large measure because of those accomplished women who went before me.

That said, there is one story worth sharing. I was on a conference call with co-counsel in a patent case. One of the lawyers described his recent argument before the Federal Circuit: "It was so bizarre," he said. "I had three women on my panel." I couldn't resist. I said, "I know just how you feel. The other day in the D.C. Circuit, I had three men on my panel. It was so unsettling." The line went silent for a few seconds. Then we all laughed — but I had made my point, with humor.

Q: What advice would you give to an aspiring female attorney?

A: Foremost, concentrate on the quality of your work product. After that, seek out people who you respect and trust, and ask for their help when you need it. Finally, don't feel that you have to be all things to all people — be true to yourself, and concentrate on developing your own personal strengths; as Oscar Wilde said, "Be yourself — everybody else is already taken."

Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase the number of women in its partner ranks?

A: Law firms should foster a strong partnership that is supportive of each other — and of those they hope to be their future partners — at times of personal need. This may mean different things for different people at different times in their professional lives, but for many women that time is when they have children, especially young children. (Of course, one of my best friends is a hugely successful partner at a big firm in New York, and her husband stays home with the children — there is no reason that women must always play that role!)

The point is that everybody has to juggle various demands in their personal lives with their professional responsibilities, and some periods of our careers will present higher levels of such demands. We should all work together to give each other a hand when needed. You would do that for your friends; you should certainly do it for your partners and your future partners.

Q: Outside your firm, name an attorney you admire and tell us why.

A: Justice Thomas, for whom I clerked. He is generous and kind in his treatment of all people, regardless of their particular background or identity, and so supportive. He once joked that, if he was going into battle and had limited ammunition, he would give it to his male clerks — because his female clerks don't need it. He delights in thinking of us as strong and forceful. That kind of positive reinforcement from a person you deeply admire gives you the fortitude you need when the legal going gets tough; you've been trained to believe that fierce — for women lawyers, no less than anybody else — is a virtue.

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