

## Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: Gibson Dunn's Debra Wong Yang

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Debra Wong Yang is co-chairwoman of Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP's crisis management practice group, white collar defense and investigations practice group, and information technology and data privacy practice group. She focuses her practice on crisis management, white collar compliance and investigations, and civil litigation. She also advises companies and clients on matters of great import or with media interest.

Yang previously served as the United States attorney for the Central District of California. She was appointed in May 2002 by President George W. Bush, who made her the first Asian-American woman to serve as a U.S. attorney. Before that, she was a California state judge, serving on the bench in Los Angeles Municipal Court and Los Angeles Superior Court.

As a participant in Law360's Minority Powerbrokers Q&A series, Yang shared her perspective on five questions:



Debra Wong Yang

**Q: How did you break the glass ceiling in the legal industry?**

A: Many would say that it was when I was appointed as the first Asian woman United States Attorney. But my path, while not filled with firsts, has been filled with many situations where I was one of a few.

**Q: What are the challenges of being a lawyer of color at a senior level?**

A: When I was the United States Attorney, there were many charging decisions that I had to make where the ultimate decision rested on me. At times the enormity of that responsibility, concerns about making sure the decision was just and fair, and taking into consideration the effort put into the investigation, made for a very lonely existence. In cases involving national security, terrorism and espionage, much of the investigation was protected, and there were few that I could share ideas with. Great scrutiny was placed on any charging decisions. This forced me to implement complete rigor in considering important data, opinions and research, but it also taught me how to find comfort in making tough decisions.

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

A: As a young and newly appointed judicial officer, the lawyers in court would argue with me, challenge my rulings, and generally give me a tough time. I later learned that they were doing this to intimidate me and to “break me in.” I found that the best solution was preparation, and I would stay late and work on the weekends to prepare for the hearings. I wanted to have a command of the legal issues and push back on the attorneys. In the end, it garnered me respect.

**Q: What advice would you give to a lawyer of color?**

A: To stay true to yourself, find your voice, and make sure to take care of those who are behind you.

**Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase diversity in its partner ranks?**

A: The law firm of the future is one that services clients and corporations with global needs. To support that kind of practice, law firms need to understand the cultures and intricacies of those worlds, and the ways in which business is conducted. The quickest path to that understanding is by increasing the diversity of the attorneys within the firm.

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