

Session 2: Diversity Perspectives: In-House Counsel

Summary of Proceeding by Omid Asgharzadeh

Moderator: *Debbie Akhbari*

Panelists: Leticia Hernández, Bernadette Lopez, Elida Moran, Catherine Romero, Rachel Seals, Katina Thornock

Abstract: This expert panel addressed diversity perspectives in the legal field. A lot of diverse candidates have incorrect assumptions made about them, resulting in doors being closed by those in positions of power. This panel shared their personal stories and encouraged students and newer attorneys to keep “knocking on those doors” and for those in positions of power to open those doors. Through their personal stories, this panel demonstrated that diverse women can overcome challenges and be incredibly successful. This panel discussed how diverse candidates often suffer from a lack of exposure to the legal field and how the idea of mentorship and sponsorship can bridge that gap. There were six panelists and each of their stories is broken into its own section in the summary of proceedings.

I. Bernadette Lopez

Ms. Lopez originally went to Duke for her undergraduate degree to become a veterinarian. After graduating with a degree in biology, she realized that she did not want to pursue becoming a veterinarian and began teaching biology in the Denver Public School System. Many parents and kids would come to her for immigration help because she was fluent in both English and Spanish. This experience was a catalyst for her to become an attorney. She went to Maurice A. Deane School of Law at Hofstra University in New York City. There, Ms. Lopez joined the Hispanic National Bar Association and Intellectual Property Law Institute. Upon graduation, Ms. Lopez moved to Minnesota to become a judicial law clerk, where she did some bilingual work for indigenous applicants. Ms. Lopez returned to New York City to work at an Intellectual Property boutique firm called Cooper & Dunham LLP. There she gained valuable experience in patent litigation, patent prosecution, trademark and copyright prosecution. Currently, Ms. Lopez is working as corporate counsel at Amazon. Ms. Lopez’s work consists of regulatory and compliance navigation supporting many of Amazon’s teams, like health and personal care, grocery, business to business, retail operations and initiatives, selection and pricing teams, supply chains, and various technology teams.

Ms. Lopez stresses that diversity isn’t always external. Ms. Lopez grew up in a small town and was a member of a historically black sorority. She speaks multiple languages and has math and science skills. She explains that she had many mentors and champions to guide her through her career. A mentor is someone who teaches someone how to do something, but a champion is the person who advocates for someone to help them get opportunities. Ms. Lopez stresses that it is

important for people to become part of the solution. At Amazon, she also operates as the hiring manager and is deliberate in her selection of others for outside counsel by giving minorities opportunities. Her journey was not a typical journey seen by many. She explains that people can get comfortable, but that students and newer associates cannot be afraid of change.

II. Leticia Hernández

Ms. Hernández and her family immigrated from Mexico to Eastern Washington when she was a baby. As a child, she was a farm worker and worked in the fields. Education prospects for someone of her background were bleak, but her parents instilled in her values for higher education. Early in her life, a teacher was able to secure computers for their small-town school and since then, Ms. Hernández has been fascinated by technology. Ms. Hernández went to college at Portland State University and became a single mother early. She felt that she was fulfilling the stereotype of Mexican women who have lots of children but did not value education. She dropped out of college to raise her child. However, she wanted to pave the road for her children and others and so she returned to finish her undergraduate degree and met many mentors that encouraged her in her goal to become an attorney. She then applied to and attended Seattle University School of Law. After graduation, she practiced family law. This experience was invaluable to her but did not fit her interests. A mentor suggested that she pursue criminal prosecution. This gave her great litigation skills and those skills were applicable to many different facets of law. Ms. Hernández then sought to transition to Intellectual Property work. She joined the Intellectual Property Law Institute and was introduced to many other attorneys in the field. A mentor introduced Ms. Hernández to Microsoft where she is currently the corporate counsel. Her work involves supporting the Windows end devices team and provides engineers with legal guidance for all their products. Ms. Hernández believes that the law is not able to innovate without diversity because of the varying perspectives that diverse people provide.

III. Catherine Romero

When Ms. Romero was young, her grandmother and her grandmother's friend told her that she should have children and that she was disappointing them by pursuing education. However, her parents valued education and pushed her to pursue an engineering degree. She wanted to become an attorney because her baby sister, whom she admired, had gone to law school. Despite her desire to become an attorney, Ms. Romero listened to her parents and pursued an engineering degree at Stanford University and began working at Boeing. At the time, engineering was not a diverse field. Ms. Romero worked with only one other woman engineer in the five years she spent at Boeing and received harassment from male employees at Boeing. At a college reunion, Ms. Romero spoke with some of her friends who had gone to law school decided that she would pursue a legal education. She was accepted by Seattle University but did not tell her parents because they believed that attorneys were dishonest and corrupt people. Ms. Romero eventually told her parents after attending her first year of law school, and it took her father about 10 years to forgive her. For Ms. Romero, she had to overcome a lot of internal family strife. During her third year of law school, Ms. Romero had a baby two weeks before finals and passed the bar despite being incredibly sleep deprived.

Ms. Romero was able to secure an associate position at Perkins Coie. She was the first associate at the firm with a baby. At Perkins Coie, Ms. Romero's assigned managing partner was a man of a different religion than Ms. Romero with a large family, including eight children. If stereotypes were relied upon, it would seem that he and Ms. Romero should have not gotten along; however, he became one of her top three mentors and champions. Ms. Romero stresses that it is important to not make assumptions about others. Ms. Romero eventually worked in-house for Microsoft and there were fewer than five Hispanics employed in the legal department despite the changing population numbers. This caused her to become more interested in diversity because of her conviction that it is important to have different perspectives in-house to better serve different consumers. At the time, Microsoft did not have much going on internally to promote diversity. Some employees were Hispanic but were afraid to speak up about diversity because they believed it would impact their careers. Ms. Romero was able to convince them to speak up about diversity within Microsoft. Ms. Romero also began speaking with the Hispanic National Bar Association leadership to increase the number of Hispanic attorneys. Specifically, she wanted to, and did, create a program that took law students early in their careers, teach them about Intellectual Property, and give them connections. Ms. Romero explains that companies and law firms typically get diverse talent from tier one law schools; however, this does not increase diversity. Through the Hispanic National Bar Association and with funding and support from Microsoft, Ms. Romero was able to increase Hispanic attorneys in Intellectual Property by over 20 percent. Other major technology companies like Amazon and Meta have since joined.

IV. Katina Thornock

Ms. Thornock was raised by her grandmother due to a hardships in her parental home. At a young age, Ms. Thornock decided to become an attorney because she had studied Justice Thurgood Marshall and the civil rights movement. Despite not having any experience with attorneys, Ms. Thornock explains that seeing those who looked like her instilled in her a belief that she could do it too. Ms. Thornock attended the University of Washington and paid for her education herself. After her undergraduate degree, she moved to Washington DC and worked for a Senator from Washington State and a Congresswoman from California. These experiences solidified her desire to be an attorney. Ms. Thornock attended Seattle University Law School and enjoyed the diversity and environment created by the school. The Black Law Student's Association was a place of refuge for her during law school. She served on moot court and worked at night to fund her law school education. During Ms. Thornock's first-year summer, she interned for Starbucks. At the time, Starbucks was an emerging company with only seven attorneys. She made great connections and mentoring relationships with attorneys who are still employed at Starbucks today. For her second-year summer, Ms. Thornock interned at a local law firm in Seattle that imploded and subsequently had no job prospects for after graduation. Seeing that she did not have a job lined up, she studied things that she liked an enjoyed what was left of her law school education. After graduating, Ms. Thornock worked at an e-discovery startup company.

Ms. Thornock continued working hard and returned to her connections at the Black Law Student's Association, explaining to them what she wanted to do. She wanted to land somewhere where she was a value add. Through her connections, Ms. Thornock was able to work at the Pierce County Prosecution Office. Later in her career, she got a job in King County and prosecuted juvenile sex crimes, which was very heartbreaking. She wanted to return to civil work and was able

to take advantage of an opportunity to join Reed McClure. Reed McClure is an insurance defense firm and Ms. Thornock was able to receive opportunities there very quickly. She was taking depositions, arguing motions, and leveraging other skills she developed from the prosecutor's office to the civil side. Reed McClure was unconventional at the time because 50 percent of the shareholders were women. Ms. Thornock owes how she practices law to them. The mentors she met at Reed McClure told her to stand on her own two feet and not to allow men to talk to her in a rude or demeaning way. They gave her the confidence that she could work as well as anyone else. After staying at Reed McClure for three years, Ms. Thornock joined Cozen O'Connor and practiced there for several years.

Ms. Thornock's friend was employed at Starbucks and asked her to join her team as a litigator. Ms. Thornock agreed, as she had always wanted to return to Starbucks. She led a small litigation team and grew it significantly, adding diverse talent to the company. Ms. Thornock and her team began to award top law firms who demonstrated their commitment to diversity and inclusion with the Starbucks Excellence and Diversity Award. Ms. Thornock started the Starbucks Diversity Mentorship Program, where her team would pair newly practicing associates in firms with experienced in-house counsel so they could have a safe place to share their experiences and seek advice. Ms. Thornock lost her mother to lung cancer. During her mother's treatment, Ms. Thornock was impressed by the professionalism and care that the hospital staff gave. This stirred a change in Ms. Thornock. She sought a way to apply her skills to add somewhere where she could make the biggest difference. Providence provided an opportunity. Providence did not have a dedicated litigation function and Ms. Thornock decided to help build it and diversify it. Ms. Thornock believes that it is vitally important that leadership ranks among caregivers accurately reflect the communities that they serve. Only then can caregivers have the right perspectives at the table to establish and execute on the right business objectives.

V. Rachel Seals

Ms. Seals was born in Korea and was adopted by a family in rural Minnesota. Out of the seven kids in the family, Ms. Seals was the first to go to college and law school. Originally, her intent was to study music, but she ended up also studying sociology and political science. Ms. Seals paid for her college on her own by working four to five jobs. There were times when she spent only two hours a night sleeping. Ms. Seals attended Mitchell Hamline School of Law. While at Mitchell Hamline, Ms. Seals joined Law Review and published an article. She became a summer associate at Maslon LLP, where she eventually became a business litigation associate. During her first week at Maslon LLP she felt that she had run a marathon at her top speed and had finally achieved her goal of becoming an attorney. Ms. Seals stayed at the firm for just under five years; however, she wanted to do employment law. Jackson Lewis P.C. provided an opportunity for her to practice employment law. Ms. Seal's partner had the opportunity to work at Amazon and she requested to be transferred to their Seattle office. Unfortunately, the Seattle office was not a good fit for her and she joined Lane Powell seeking better opportunities.

Ms. Seals was approaching the eight-year mark and was unsure of whether to become a partner in a firm or to have kids. She did not believe that she could do both. Consequently, she left private practice, began working for the City of Seattle's Labor and Employment Department, and began a family. Unlike Lane Powell, the City of Seattle provided plenty of opportunities for her and she stayed there for five years. Ms. Seals was later able to obtain a position in-house at

Microsoft.

VI. Conclusion

This expert panel addresses diversity perspectives in the legal field through their own personal stories. Many diverse candidates have incorrect assumptions made about them resulting in doors being closed by those in positions of power. Their personal stories encourage diverse students and attorneys to keep knocking on doors and for those in positions of power to open those doors. Diverse women can overcome challenges and become incredibly successful. This panel discussed how diverse candidates often suffer from a lack of exposure to the legal field and how the idea of mentorship and sponsorship can bridge that gap.