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Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Hunton & Williams' Sandy Collins



Cassandra “Sandy” Collins is a partner in Hunton & Williams LLP’s Richmond, Va., office. As the administrative partner of the firm’s global litigation group, she is responsible for managing the allocation of firm resources on litigation matters for a group of more than 200 attorneys. As a first-chair trial and appellate attorney with more than 30 trials under her belt at the firm, she has helped manufacturers, energy companies, mining companies, utilities, beverage distributors and other major corporations streamline their existing dockets, resolve mission-critical disputes, prevent future litigation and minimize litigation-related expenses overall.

Collins also has been a committed supporter of the firm’s pro bono office in Richmond since its opening more than two decades ago, and has been involved in the office’s project of providing legal aid to financially limited neighborhood residents.

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

A: For me, it was being comfortable with myself. I never really thought too much about the fact that I was a female litigator in a male-dominated sector of law. My parents raised me to believe that I could do anything. There was nothing beyond my reach — they gave me so much confidence. I also had very strong male mentors early in my career at the firm — Matt Calvert and Terry Gromel — who cared about the quality of my work and my dedication to it. I saw that what mattered was the product I gave and how hard I worked.

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

A: There is a heavy weight to being one of the senior-level women at Hunton & Williams. I’m in my 25th year at the firm, and feel a great responsibility to make it a better place, as well as a responsibility to help other women in the firm grow professionally. A challenge has been determining how to dedicate my resources to develop and maintain a strong practice, as well as to be a strong mentor to those who are up and coming. Juggling my finite time and energy to raise my family, grow my practice and mentor others is definitely a challenge.

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

A: One incident very early in my career may have involved prejudice on several fronts: youth, gender, and my Appalachian background. I have a twang that comes from being from Kentucky, and it was pretty strong when I was in my first and second years at the firm. Our client was a power company, and I was taking the plaintiff’s deposition in a slip-and-fall case. The attorney on the other side was an older man whose mission seemed to be to intimidate me — a young female with a strong Kentucky accent. He made a comment to me, asking whether I wore shoes. I politely stopped the deposition, went off the record, and told him it was an inappropriate comment. I was boiling with anger, but I took a deep breath, focused on my mission, and finished the deposition. I didn’t want him to rattle me. He was in his 60s and I was in my mid-20s. My mentor was there, and let me handle it on my own.

You learn early on that you just have to be direct and you can't be rattled. With litigation, you are playing a game in some respects. But I don't think my opposing counsel in that deposition would have said something like that to a young man. Sometimes sexism is how you perceive it — but for me the best path is ignoring the background noise and focusing on what matters — the quality of my practice.

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

A: Focus on your practice, focus on your work, and focus on the quality of the work. Screen out the noise and distractions — focus on what you're doing and seize every opportunity you can. It doesn't mean tolerating harassment situations, but if you get pulled into the distractions, you'll be less likely to focus on what you need to do to be successful. If you really want to make it as a partner at a top law firm, you have to be willing to take on a variety of challenges and not be afraid of them.

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

A: Firms need to be strategic in increasing women partners. They need to have a plan and to nurture that plan. I serve on a firm committee that makes sure we ask the necessary questions and touch base with every team head on a regular basis about the professional development of the women on their respective teams. We have a continual dialogue about the promotion of women and about identifying potential impediments to success. It is important to increase the number of women in our ranks both to reflect the real world and what our clients want.

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

A: Altria Group general counsel Denise F. Keane has worked herself up through the ranks, and she is extremely dedicated to the profession. She is so committed to the advancement of women in the law, and also has served as the general at the helm of putting Altria's diversity policy into action. She commits her time and energy both in her workplace and in the wider community. Her dedication is extremely laudable.