

## Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Sterne Kessler's Eldora Ellison



*Law360, New York (June 13, 2014, 11:09 AM ET)* -- Eldora L. Ellison, Ph.D. is a director in Sterne Kessler Goldstein & Fox PLLC's Washington, D.C., office. She co-chairs the firm's patent office litigation practice. Her experience includes representing clients in approximately 20 inter partes review proceedings, more than 15 patent interferences, and in various patent re-examinations and district court litigations. Her practice also includes evaluating patent portfolios, e.g., for due diligence analyses, invalidity, noninfringement, or freedom-to-operate; preparing and prosecuting patent applications; counseling clients on intellectual property strategy, including Hatch-Waxman issues; and resolving inventorship disputes.

Ellison has served as an expert witness on patent matters, Managing Intellectual Property magazine has named her an "IP Star," and LMG Life Sciences has twice named her a "Life Sciences Star." She has served on the faculty for the District of Columbia Bar's Continuing Legal Education Program. She is the chairwoman of the firm's professional development committee, she previously chaired the firm's diversity committee, and she was recently elected to the firm's executive committee.

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

A: I've tried to make the most of the opportunities that have come my way, and I've been fortunate to have some supporters along the way. Perseverance has served me well; I generally don't give up easily when I want something. And, it helps not to be overly concerned with what other people think. Not being overly concerned makes it easier to speak up and take risks.

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

A: One of the challenges is in making sure I'm pursuing my career goals for the right reasons. Am I pushing toward a certain goal because it's something that I want for my own satisfaction, or is it just for the firm's benefit, or is it to prove a point about what women can accomplish? It's probably some combination of the above, and I'm not always sure that it's the right combination. As a senior woman in a law firm, I know that more junior women have often looked to me for career advice, and I feel a certain obligation to give them a realistic picture of the pros and cons of rising through the ranks.

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

A: There have been a number of times when I've arrived at another law firm and the receptionist assumes that I'm a court reporter, or when I've attended an event and someone assumes I'm a secretary. While I have a lot of respect for court reporters and secretaries, I note that this doesn't tend to happen to the male lawyers I know. And I suspect that racial bias also plays a part. In response to such assumptions, I always correct the other person, e.g., by explaining that I am the attorney taking the deposition, or that I'm the expert witness for the case or one of the partners in the firm. But the way in which I correct the other person has varied depending on how pointed I want to be in drawing the other person's attention to the fact that they've made assumptions based on appearances. Ironically, all of the receptionists who have made this assumption have been other women.

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

A: Speak up and take risks. A number of the young, female attorneys I know "hold back" due to a shortage of confidence. They're more hesitant than their male counterparts to throw out ideas at meetings or to ask for leadership positions. But some of the biggest confidence boosters come from taking chances and realizing that the world didn't end as a result. And, of course, learning your craft certainly helps to build confidence.

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

A: Ensure that women are given leadership opportunities and business development opportunities. Some well-deserving women simply need guidance and a little nudging to take advantage of the opportunities that lie before them. And don't underestimate the value of sharing your own experiences on how to navigate through a law firm — whether you're male or female. A lot of good insights are shared over drinks after work, and some women miss out on such conversations.

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

A: I admire Laurie Hill, who is vice president, intellectual property at MedImmune. She was opposing counsel to me when she was at a previous company, and we got to know each other personally after that case ended. I respect her deep knowledge of law and business, her commitment to excellence, and especially her personal integrity and leadership skills.

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