

Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: Sterne Kessler's Dr. Longworth

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Gaby L. Longworth, Ph.D., is a director in the biotechnology and chemical group at Sterne Kessler Goldstein & Fox PLLC, an intellectual property law firm in Washington, D.C. Dr. Longworth advises both innovator and generic biotech and pharmaceutical companies on IP and product lifecycle management strategies. A large part of her practice is focused on representing international and domestic generic pharmaceutical companies in patent cases involving abbreviated new drug applications that include a Paragraph IV certification to one or more Orange Book-listed patents. She also uses her generic drug experience to counsel innovator pharmaceutical companies throughout the world in all areas of patent procurement, including domestic and foreign patent preparation, and lifecycle management strategies.



Gaby L. Longworth, Ph.D.

Dr. Longworth is one of the organizers of INSPIRED, an informal mentoring program for the female attorneys at Sterne Kessler. She also chairs the marketing committee at the firm and served as co-chairwoman of the Working Parents Forum of the Women's Bar Association of D.C. for three years. Previously, she was named a "Mover & Shaker" by the Minority Corporate Counsel Association.

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

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

A: For me, achieving success has been due in large part to the strong support system that I've enjoyed over the years, from not only friends and family, but colleagues and trusted mentors. Friends and family cheered me on when I became a recipient of a predoctoral minority fellowship from the National Institute of General Medical Sciences and encouraged me as I obtained a Ph.D. in human genetics and molecular biology from the Johns Hopkins University and then a J.D. from Georgetown University. Colleagues provided much needed advice and camaraderie as we worked together on teams and used each other as sounding posts. Generous and committed mentors believed in me, took me under their collective wings, and saw me as a potential candidate for advancement. Being rather extroverted and a grateful and hard-working mentee certainly played a big role. Many women and ethnic minorities face all sorts of barriers that prevent them from reaching prestigious and elite positions in the legal industry

but I was fortunate to have received opportunities that others perhaps never get.

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

A: The biggest challenge of being a female lawyer of color at any level is racial and gender bias that unfortunately still exists. Women of color in law are historically underestimated and discounted until they have proven themselves. As an immigrant to the USA, the notion of racial and gender bias was at first foreign to me. I quickly realized that most folks are not as "color-blind" as I am. Let me explain what I mean. I was born and raised in Suriname, a small (rather unknown) country in South America with a population of about 550,000. Suriname is a former Dutch colony, and the official language is Dutch. I am also the daughter of parents with mixed ethnicity. In fact, Suriname is an incredible melting pot of various cultures, languages and ethnicities with immigrants from India, Indonesia, China, Portugal and Lebanon, as well as descendants of former slaves from Western Africa, predominantly Ghana. For example, in my family alone, there are blond, blue-eyed Dutch first cousins on one side, and dark-chocolate-brown, half-Chinese first cousins on the other. I grew up essentially "color-blind," and was taught to value others not based on the color of their skin or their ethnic background, but rather their character and attributes. In addition, I was surrounded by strong women from all backgrounds in powerful positions and with vibrant careers. Growing up, it simply never occurred to me that women could not accomplish what they set their minds to. Very few people can control the behavior of others, and I am no exception. But I have tried to stay true to what I was taught growing up. The key is to get past the initial awkward moment, find something that you have in common with colleagues or clients, and build on that. Once you can get someone to look beyond skin color and gender, and to appreciate your qualifications and expertise, the challenges often disappear.

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

A: In a merit-driven profession, I've seldom experienced overt discrimination in my career. However, once, as a junior associate I had arranged an expert-consultant interview with an accomplished and renowned surgeon for a pharmaceutical matter. For the meeting, I was accompanied by a senior, male, Caucasian partner. Despite the fact that I was on-point, running the meeting and asking the questions, the surgeon would physically turn his body away from me and direct his responses to the senior partner. I remained professional throughout the interview but was shocked by the surgeon's behavior. The takeaway from that experience is that regardless of how others may treat you, taking the high road and remaining professional will always preserve your dignity.

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

A: The advice I would give to a lawyer of color is similar to what I would give any junior lawyer with a caveat. To be a successful lawyer, you need to be able to relate to people effectively. Opening yourself up to new experiences and developing a diverse network of professional and personal relationships can help transcend perceived or actual barriers. Lawyers of color have to work harder at it, because their white colleagues, mistakenly, may think they have nothing in common. Building meaningful, genuine relationships with peers and colleagues is hugely important in the legal profession. High emotional intelligence is another.

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

A: In intellectual property, there are not a sufficient number of attorneys with a science or engineering background and a law degree to recruit. Thus, the pool of diverse talent to choose from is already rather

small. That said, I've spent my entire professional career at Sterne Kessler, and the firm is an exceptional example of diversity among its partner ranks — nearly a third. My recommendations would be predicated upon what I've experienced at the firm. To increase diversity at the partner ranks in IP, a firm should have an open-minded culture, and a plan to begin recruiting ethnically diverse scientists and engineers straight from graduate school programs. Those scientist and engineers can be trained in patent law and encouraged to attend law school. Of course, the firm should also attempt to recruit ethnically diverse attorneys early in their careers, and implement both a formal and informal mentoring program to help chart their career paths and foster a culture of inclusion.

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