

Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: Susman Godfrey's Srinivasan

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Kalpana Srinivasan is a partner in Susman Godfrey LLP's Los Angeles office. She has secured more than \$1 billion in recoveries and savings for clients in patent, copyright, class action, contract and other disputes.

While Susman Godfrey was named one of Law360's Most Feared Plaintiffs Firms and one of America's Elite Trial Lawyers by The National Law Journal, Srinivasan boasts many accolades of her own. In 2014, the Los Angeles and San Francisco Daily Journal named her one of California's top 20 lawyers under the age of 40. The National Asian Pacific American Bar Association also recognized Srinivasan as one of its "Best Lawyers Under 40." She has been considered a Southern California "Rising Star" and one of the Top Women Attorneys in Southern California by Los Angeles magazine.

In 2015, Srinivasan will serve as a commissioner on the Judicial Nominees Evaluation Commission of the California State Bar, which vets the governor's potential judicial candidates. She has served on the executive committees of the South Asian Bar Association of North America and Southern California and was the founding co-chairwoman of Susman Godfrey's diversity committee. Before becoming a lawyer, she reported for The Associated Press in Washington, D.C., covering national media and telecommunications policy.

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

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

A: By being visible. Getting to do stand-up work and managing big-ticket cases at an early stage at a firm like Susman Godfrey has made a huge difference in my professional life. I seized every opportunity early on to show my skills outside of the office and establish my abilities as a trial lawyer. But those kinds of opportunities have to exist in order to take advantage of them.

I still see a glass ceiling in the courtroom. Lots of big corporate entities and firms — including many I've



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faced — tout their numbers of women and their diversity statistics; but in the courtroom, those lawyers are not so readily found at counsel's table or up at the podium. I recently tried a case in the Northern District of California and delivered opening statements. A news reporter watching in the gallery who covers a lot of trials told me later it had been a long time since she had seen a woman deliver an opening. It struck a chord to be reminded of that. My clients and law partners entrust and expect me to have a prominent role at trial, from putting on important experts to cross examining the key corporate representatives of an adversary — and it says a lot about others who do not offer their diverse and female lawyers the same opportunity.

I encourage other lawyers to look for places where there is at least the hope of getting hands-on responsibility and stand-up roles, whether that means going to a smaller boutique firm, a firm with a practice group that really fosters young lawyers, the government or an organization where you can get exposure. If the opportunities aren't there, it doesn't matter what your background is or how accomplished you are as a lawyer. Minority lawyers should be especially mindful of where they choose to practice. Take a hard look at what lawyers in that workplace are doing, how they are advancing and what kind of skills they are developing. Ask probing questions about how work is assigned and what real responsibility you can expect. Assess what kind of exposure you will have for the long term.

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

A: Lawyers have a lot of demands on their time. As you advance in your career, that doesn't change — from trying to develop business to managing your cases to being in trial, time remains at a premium. But it's important to use some of the goodwill you have accumulated to further the interests of your community and other promising young lawyers. That can be as simple as sharing stories about your own career path with others to being involved in mainstream legal organizations and institutions which are in need of more senior and diverse lawyers.

It's also really important to remain comfortable in your own professional skin. The further you ascend, the fewer faces you may see that mirror yours; you may not find lawyers who already have forged the exact path you want to take in a way that feels natural to you. You can draw on a wide range of resources in your decision-making — from people whose practice you want to model to others who have a vested interest in your long-term success. Ultimately, though, you have to own the choices you are making about your future.

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

A: I've tried cases in wide-reaching parts of the country — ranging from plaintiff-side patent cases in East Texas to defense-side class actions in a small town in Kentucky. In a jury trial, you have to be aware of what the jury will think of a lawyer, including a female and a minority lawyer. In one case, and because I was curious, we polled a mock jury on whether their views of my client's position changed because the arguments came from someone who looked different than what they expected. In the end, most jurors were either agnostic or viewed a female, minority lawyer as being more effective. This was not entirely surprising because many rural juries have a high percentage of women, and juries in heavily populated areas have a high percentage of women and minorities. The result from the mock juries (and the real jurors in cases I've tried) reinforce that effective advocacy can come from a wide range of sources. It was valuable to hear this and get back to focusing on winning.

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

A: Be authentic for all the reasons people always say — it's good for your personal well-being and fulfillment. But there is more to it: It really benefits the development of the legal profession. There are lots of ways to be a successful advocate, in and out of the courtroom. Different styles, different techniques and different-looking faces can yield great results for clients in a variety of ways. It's good to shake up the idea that a successful lawyer has to look a particular way or have a certain persona. I routinely see lawyers emulating what they think an effective litigator or a fierce trial lawyer has to be like, and that just perpetuates this notion that there is only one type of lawyer that fits the bill.

The other advice I would give is to pick a workplace where you can be heard and recognized. You may not find an institution filled with people who share the exact same demographics as you, but that's not always as critical as finding a place where there is an outlet for the ideas you have. When I started at Susman Godfrey, we did not have a diversity committee and I suggested we should, having just come out of the recruiting process with a lot of firms that did. The firm promptly started a committee and, because I raised the idea, they made me (a three-month-old associate) one of the founding co-chairs. That spoke volumes to me.

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

A: Don't sideline your diverse lawyers at game time. All too often I see other law firms that have female and minority lawyers on their day-to-day litigation teams but put these same lawyers behind the scenes when it comes time for trial, major hearings or even depositions. This is a huge disservice to these lawyers who deserve the chance to hone their skills and showcase their talents to clients, judges, jurors and other lawyers. It's also critical to their long-term success in the legal business, which firms should want to help secure.

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