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## Diversity – Law Firms

# Jones Day's Diversity Initiative: Building An Environment Where All Can Reach Their Potential

*The Editor interviews Leslie C. Overton,  
Partner, Jones Day.*

**Editor:** Ms. Overton, please tell our readers something about your professional experience.

**Overton:** I graduated from Michigan Law School in 1994, clerked for a federal judge, and then joined Jones Day. The antitrust practice was a great fit. I love the fact-finding process – it is so interesting to learn about the client's business and industry and understand what they're trying to do and why they believe it is procompetitive. I then use the facts and economic theory to explain how a proposed merger or particular conduct leads to efficiencies that help consumers. In 2000 I moved to California (my husband took a law teaching job there) where I practiced antitrust and did some transactional work. Two years later we moved back to Washington, DC so that I could serve as Counsel to the Assistant Attorney General for Antitrust at the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). I returned to Jones Day's antitrust practice in 2004, and became a partner in January 2006.

**Editor:** Why did you choose Jones Day?

**Overton:** The incredibly talented people with whom I interviewed were funny, down-to-earth, and interested, first and foremost, in serving their clients. Also important, Charles James, the current General Counsel of Chevron Texaco, was a partner then and talked about the wonderful opportunities he'd had at Jones Day, which



**Leslie C. Overton**

he referred to as a "meritocracy." I think it is safe to say that he was the only African-American heading up a leading global antitrust practice at that time. He promised to look out for me if I joined the firm; he kept that promise and has been an outstanding mentor.

**Editor:** How has your practice evolved over the course of your career?

**Overton:** On the road from associate to partner, I've assumed more responsibility in resolving clients' problems. I've always had meaningful input – at our firm we want to hear good ideas whether they come from younger or more experienced lawyers. But now that I'm a partner I'm able to be even more responsive to clients' needs because I

have more expertise and can provide advice real-time when feasible. I am doing more counseling, which is particularly satisfying because I can help clients avoid antitrust problems in the first place or catch issues while they are still small and easily managed.

Healthcare antitrust is a subspecialty I continue to develop, building upon the experience I gained while serving at DOJ, where I had a leadership role in preparing a report on the subject with the Federal Trade Commission. I'm still handling a lot of mergers and acquisitions work, but play a greater role in strategic decisions and interact more with clients and government lawyers. I continue to enjoy good relationships with my former DOJ colleagues, which makes for more productive negotiations. They know that I am credible. The variety of my non-merger matters has increased over the years. Just recently I have helped a client with an internal corporate investigation and explored bringing a monopolization case against a competitor for another client. What has not changed throughout my career is the satisfaction I get from adding value for my clients. I especially like surprising clients expecting to hear "no" by saying – when I can – "yes, and here's how we can do this safely."

**Editor:** You're very involved with the American Bar Association Section of Antitrust Law. Please tell us about your bar service.

**Overton:** My ABA work results from Jones Day's great mentoring. The head of the firm's antitrust practice, Phil Proger,

*Please email the interviewee at [lcoverton@jonesday.com](mailto:lcoverton@jonesday.com) with questions about this interview.*

appointed me as his assistant when he served as chair of the ABA Section of Antitrust Law, a prestigious group within the bar. That gave me extraordinary exposure to leading practitioners, government officials, scholars and economists. Phil's initial invitation, plus a lot of hard work, allowed me to move through the Section's ranks over the years. I currently serve on the governing Council and the editorial board for our flagship treatise, *Antitrust Law Developments*. Wearing my third "hat" as liaison to the ABA's Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession lets me serve as ambassador to the greater ABA and exchange best practices with other ABA sections. The position also gives me a platform to talk about the excitement of an antitrust career with those who might not otherwise consider the field. Every year I chair an antitrust program at the ABA's National Conference for the Minority Lawyer, and I host at Jones Day a citywide program for law students on antitrust and diversity.

**Editor: Speaking of diversity, Jones Day is celebrated for its diversity and its culture of inclusiveness. Can you tell us something about the origins of the firm's commitment to these values?**

**Overton:** Jones Day's commitment to diversity is consistent with the culture of meritocracy that I've mentioned and our "One Firm Worldwide" approach, where we focus on what a lawyer can bring to the firm and its clients, regardless of background or location. The firm has demonstrated that commitment in tangible ways over a long period of time. Recently, I had the pleasure of meeting Naoma Stewart, the first female partner at the firm and one of the first female partners at any major firm in the country. She began at Jones Day as an associate at a time when most firms would not interview women. The firm's Diversity Task Force has its origins as far back as 1987.

**Editor: What is the mission of the Jones Day Diversity Task Force today?**

**Overton:** The task force helps make sure that Jones Day continues to be a place where lawyers can make significant contributions and reach their potential, regardless of their background or gender. We focus on recruiting – both entry-level and lateral – career development, and the related issue of retention. We look for opportunities to support minority and women lawyers within the firm, and raise awareness of the

firm's commitment to diversity through a variety of events.

**Editor: How do these commitments translate into truly effective programs?**

**Overton:** As with client matters, while we don't want to reinvent the wheel, we want to make sure we're thinking creatively so that we are effectively meeting the needs presented. We are involved in traditional programming such as participation in minority job fairs and sponsorship of various law school conferences. These efforts expose us to talented students that we might not otherwise meet on-campus, and also communicate that diversity is a core value at Jones Day. But we try not to limit ourselves to what has been done before by us or other law firms. As with clients, we're interested in real relationships that lead to success. For example, we have a long-standing internship program with Spelman and Morehouse, historically black colleges in Atlanta. We also encourage our young lawyers to implement fresh diversity ideas, perhaps through involvement in minority professional organizations. One of our New York associates hosts an annual joint Latino Bar Association celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month at Jones Day.

**Editor: You mentioned mentoring. Does the firm have a mentoring program?**

**Overton:** Formal mentoring varies from office to office. In the Washington office, for example, mentoring begins when a young person arrives as a summer associate. He or she is assigned two or even three mentors, one of whom is a partner. When the students return as full-time associates, those mentoring relationships continue, and we will add mentors to meet individual needs. As effective as this formal mentoring program is, the best thing about mentoring at Jones Day – in all our offices – is the depth and extent of mentoring on an informal basis. It crosses all kinds of ethnic, gender and racial lines, and it occurs where – at least on the surface – two people may appear to have little in common. In my case, Phil Proger and Joe Sims – who are neither minority nor female – have been wonderful mentors. Their support has been instrumental to the success I have enjoyed here.

**Editor: *The New York Times* published a story about a controversial study that suggests by hiring minority lawyers with lower grades than their white counterparts, law firms are setting these minori-**

**ties up to fail in the competition for partnership. What do you think?**

**Overton:** The study is similar to one by the same professor some years back and is, in my view, equally flawed. There have been a number of very good responses to these studies by scholars such as Professors Chambers and Lempert at Michigan, and Professors Coleman and Gulati at Duke. One of my biggest issues with the law firm study is that it does not address the many reasons that people leave law firms. My husband, for example, left his firm to become a law professor. Many others leave to become in-house counsel, in numerous cases joining clients. Still other minority lawyers feel called to government service jobs they couldn't initially afford to take due to law school loans. None of this appears to figure in the study. The study also masks the importance of mentoring. To paraphrase a friend who spoke about the study to *The New York Times*, I did not become a partner at Jones Day due to my A in constitutional law. I became a partner because I had mentors that encouraged me and afforded me a chance to shine. A person may have the best grades in the world, but without that support and opportunities to show what he or she can do, the chances of becoming partner are pretty slim.

**Editor: Looking forward, what would you like to see accomplished at Jones Day with respect to diversity over the next five years?**

**Overton:** I would like and fully expect to see us continue on our current path. By way of example, in roughly the past three years the firm has named six new African American partners, most of whom have come from the firm's ranks, myself included. I'm privileged to be able to play a role in continuing to build upon this momentum – I recently became Co-Chair of the Washington office's Diversity Task Force. Certainly diversity is an important value to me personally – particularly given that I have been able to thrive due to trailblazing and commitment by so many others. I am so pleased that it is also an important institutional value at Jones Day. I want Jones Day to be viewed as an obvious top destination – short-term and long-term – for the best and brightest women lawyers and lawyers of color because it is a place where they can soar without any limitations on their potential. I am confident that the work we are doing on diversity right now will pay dividends for the firm, our lawyers and staff, and most important, our clients.