

## Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Jones Day's Mary Ellen Powers

*Law360, New York (November 22, 2013, 1:29 PM ET)* -- Mary Ellen Powers is partner-in-charge of Jones Day's Europe/Middle East region, overseeing 14 offices and 500 lawyers. She has served in leadership roles at Jones Day for almost 20 years, including heading the 220-lawyer Washington, D.C., office, and serving as firm administrative partner and on the partnership and advisory committees.

A litigator, she has worked on numerous high-profile matters, including representing IBM in toxic tort suits, Saudi clients in 9/11-related litigation, First American Bankshares in the BCCI banking scandal and Mattel in congressional investigations on toy safety.

Powers received the Transformative Leadership Award from InsideCounsel and has been honored by the DC Women's Bar Association and National Law Journal. She is a trustee of the Jones Day Foundation, has served on the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Committee, and lectured on trial advocacy at George Washington University.

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

A: Having three brothers, playing sports and liking beer probably didn't hurt. But mostly, I was lucky to join a firm that put a premium on teamwork and eschewed a star system. In a place that doesn't tolerate 800-pound gorillas or sharp elbows, testosterone is not as highly valued as talent, hard work and effective team play. Becoming indispensable to important client matters goes a long way toward breaking down barriers.

I would not be where I am today but for several partners who gave me opportunities, opened doors and promoted me both internally and to clients. Two years ago, a retired partner sent me a letter he had found while cleaning out old files. He had written it in 1984, when I was a young associate, to Pat McCartan, the firm's top litigator and future managing partner. The letter said that I would become a partner of great value to the firm if given the right opportunities, and that the firm should do whatever it took to keep me there. Although I didn't know about the letter at the time, its timing was fortuitous: I was one-month pregnant. Fifteen months later, Pat McCartan agreed to let me be the guinea pig for part-time arrangements in the litigation department.

I was also fortunate to work with men who were sensitive to the subtle challenges women faced. On several occasions when (male) clients turned to me, as the only woman in a meeting, and asked for coffee, male partners got up and, without a word, poured the client coffee. Point made: She's here as a lawyer. And we all know how to get coffee.

I knew we were making progress when, in the mid-1980s, a partner in the firm, Erwin Griswold, the

former dean of the Harvard Law School and U.S. solicitor general, then well into his 80's, came into my office on a Saturday and asked me to teach him how to make photocopies. I offered to copy the documents for him but he refused, saying "I understand I'm not allowed to ask lady lawyers to use the photocopying machine."

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

A: Internally, the challenges are not much different than those that male colleagues face. In fact, in some ways, the women in leadership roles at Jones Day have an advantage: a cohesive informal support group that some of our male colleagues may not have. The firm has 15 women running offices, practices or regions in the firm. We've become good friends. We look for opportunities to get together, share laughs, and know we can count on each other for advice or support. These relationships are invaluable to me and contribute to the success of the firm.

External challenges still remain. On bet-the-company deals or cases, general counsels and corporate boards still often look for the archetypal senior partner of years past — who was always male. That happens even in companies that make diversity a criterion in the selection of outside counsel. (It is partly an age issue; younger male partners face the same bias.) As corporate boards take on more women directors, hopefully those subtle stereotypes will begin to change.

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

A: As a law student in the late 1970s, I interviewed for jobs in Atlanta because my boyfriend (now husband), also a lawyer, wanted to accept a job there. In retrospect, the legal profession in Atlanta was a few years behind the trends emerging on the coasts and in the Midwest, where I grew up. I hadn't faced much overt sexism so the experience was a rude awakening.

A partner at one firm asked whether I was still interested in practicing law now that I had a boyfriend. A partner at another firm, when told I was undecided about litigation, retorted: "If you haven't wanted to be a litigator since you were 10, you don't have what it takes." I didn't know what a litigator was when I was 10, and I'd certainly never seen a woman litigator. I began asking to meet women lawyers to see how they were faring. One firm rolled out its sole female associate, who told me there were no problems for "girl lawyers" — as long as they were "reasonably good looking."

Her assurances that I would be fine weren't enough to stop me from fleeing north to Washington, where I found a firm that has been a great fit, culturally and personally, for 33 years. And "fit" is important: It can be the difference between effecting real change from within and fighting quixotic battles from the fringes. Although I didn't understand that point in 1979, I knew I was a fish out of water in Atlanta for reasons that went well beyond sexism. But my Southern-talking, rattlesnake-hunting partner, Lizanne Thomas, the head of our Atlanta office, became the perfect agent for change in that city just a few years later, helping to open doors for generations of young women lawyers.

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

A: Be yourself. Keep your sense of humor. Don't let little things bother you. Be curious about the world — the opportunities in the legal profession over the next several decades are tremendous. Take the long view: You have 40 years to build a career. There's no "right time" or "right way" to balance a career with a family. (See response to the last question below). Learn to make a decision and be accountable for it. Be a team player. Have fun!

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

A: It's easier said than done, but get rid of compensation systems that create internal competition and reward sharp elbows. Management can preach integration and teamwork till they are blue in the face but if compensation is based on claims of business origination, firms are paying partners to be selfish and they'll get what they pay for.

It's a stereotype, but one with more than a grain of truth: Many women (guys too) thrive in an environment that rewards teamwork, where putting the interests of clients and the firm ahead of individual interests is valued and fighting with colleagues is verboten. We've had such a system at Jones Day for decades, and it's one of the reasons — leadership from the managing partner being another one — why so many women are now in leadership positions. I've heard lawyers at other firms suggest that young women be trained to develop sharp elbows so they can fight more successfully with their colleagues. If that's the only solution in those firms, it's an ugly one, and one that will continue to drive women — and men — from the profession.

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

A: Terri Natoli, vice president of regulatory affairs, Time Warner Cable. Terri finished law school while pregnant with her fifth child, and despite the late start, zoomed to top positions in government and industry, manifesting a breathtaking level of skill, calm, organization and good humor.

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