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Phone: +1 646 783 7100 | Fax: +1 646 783 7161 | customerservice@law360.com

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Jones Day's Lizanne Thomas

Law360, New York (December 02, 2013, 1:30 PM ET) -- Lizanne Thomas is head of Jones Day's global corporate governance practice and partner-in-charge of the 140-lawyer Atlanta office. Previously, she served as firmwide administrative partner, during which time she overhauled the associate evaluation system and expanded the firm's support of part-time positions for lawyers. This past year, she developed and led the firm's first senior associate academy, a global three-day program covering business and practice development training programs and networking for over 100 senior associates.

She is also on Jones Day's partnership committee and president of the Jones Day Foundation, which funds programs to relieve suffering, support women and underprivileged children, and promote education and the arts throughout Jones Day's worldwide footprint. She is a nine-year member of the board of directors of Krispy Kreme Doughnuts, where she chairs the governance committee and previously chaired a special committee charged with investigating wrongdoing involving the company.

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

A: There wasn't a firm like Jones Day in Atlanta when I graduated from law school. I interviewed with all the usual suspects, the major old-line firms in the city, and looked for one that had the widest range of people and clients. (I guess I was searching for diversity, but we didn't use that word back then.) My interviews that day ranged from a discussion about rattlesnake hunting with a tough-talking litigator (as a Floridian, I actually had a story or two to contribute) to a discussion about art and golf with a corporate partner who later became my mentor.

I was swayed by the culture of the firm — excellent lawyers who didn't all look alike or act alike, a strong client base, and a culture of meritocracy. And then, when Jones Day merged with my firm in 1989, I became the luckiest of lawyers — without changing jobs, I moved from being a medium fish in a medium pond to being the same fish in a surprisingly buoyant ocean.

I never expected to be a part of one of the world's largest international law firms — after all, I only speak two languages: English and Southern. But the culture fit — the commitment to teamwork, to excellence, to doing good while doing well, was so clear. From that start, I worked on a variety of M&A transactions and then began to focus more specifically on corporate governance — a natural interest of mine. I suppose that this specialty in particular helped me break into what sometimes seemed like an old boys' network, because there weren't many people focusing on the area, and it was a discipline I found to be a perfect synthesis of my interests and training. Today, I'm in board meetings probably 100 times per year.

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

A: I think the challenges are greater for junior women moving up in firms or businesses; by the time a woman is "senior," whatever challenges present themselves are rarely gender-specific. Time management. Delegation. Being kind. Remembering to focus on the important, not just the urgent. Thinking about legacy. Oh yes. I am grateful beyond words that those have come back in style, thanks to Princess Kate. Those of us who are "senior" are not ideally suited, so to speak, for the bare leg look.

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

A: I'd rather talk about a time in which a male senior partner of mine averted a sexist moment — this may be one of the most instructive and generous experiences of my professional life, and I try to apply it daily.

This partner was not particularly known for his social graces — he was focused on the work, almost to a fault. The kind of person who would forget to say hello.

He brought me into a highly stressful situation in which our client, a bank, was the unhappy owner of a group of businesses because the owners had absconded with the proceeds of a sizable loan that had been poorly underwritten. It was my job to handle the auction and merger negotiations for the businesses.

I was an associate at the time, new to the client, and younger by far than anyone in the room. The partner brought me into the boardroom, saw the raised eyebrows, and said, "Here is LT. She is my favorite M&A lawyer and our best. She will run this auction and work harder than anyone you know to get your money back. When I have my toughest assignments, she is the one I call. Matter of fact, her phone number is embedded in my Seiko digital watch." (This was in the '80s, mind you.)

Now to be clear, I didn't deserve this praise, but I was lifted up — almost literally — by the support of this partner. The bankers trusted him, and therefore they trusted me. I was able to move right past the need to legitimize myself and could work the problem from the get-go. We had a good outcome, but more importantly, I learned that with issues of diversity or women in the workplace, the senior lawyer has the first responsibility to create a welcoming atmosphere. I try to seize those opportunities whenever I can.

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

A: Communicate. Have a sense of humor. Forgive clumsiness. Portray confidence. Be curious. Don't marginalize yourself.

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

A: It appears that the law firm challenge is not recruiting, but retention. The choices available to women today are broader than ever before — broader than they really are for men, in most respects. Law firms will see higher attrition from its pool of women lawyers precisely because of the breadth of other choices, and in some respects we should welcome that as success — not failure. But for those who want to encourage more women in the partner ranks, I would say we have to do two things. We must have critical mass in terms of role models, and we must communicate — the firm's culture, the ways other women have made it work, why this profession is so fulfilling, where to turn for help. Modeling is not enough, and neither is talking. We must teach AND do.

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

A: Anne Whittemore is a senior partner at McGuireWoods in Richmond, Va. Anne and I have shared the representation of a corporate client important to both our firms — and for years, have met with that client's CLO at a spa twice per year. Even at the outset, there was no competition, just shared support for one another and for our common client. Some work gets done, to be sure, but over time she has become simply a friend and role model to me.

She is measured, utterly clear-eyed on matters of integrity, strong yet (dare I say it) feminine, uncompromising in the exercise of her considerable intellect, and just opinionated enough to make our conversations sparkle. She is a leader in her community, on the Board of the Federal Reserve in Richmond and some large corporations. And always welcoming to young (and not-so-young) women in the profession.

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