

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Choate's Brenda Jarrell

Law360, New York (January 03, 2014, 12:47 PM ET) -- As co-chairwoman of Choate Hall & Stewart LLP's life sciences group and chairwoman of the intellectual property group, Brenda Herschbach Jarrell, Ph.D., brings technical credentials and scientific training to her practice. She has experience representing all types of companies and institutions at all stages of the life sciences business lifecycle, as well as those who invest in them. Jarrell is a member of the firm's executive committee. She has been named Best Lawyers' "Boston Lawyer of the Year" for biotechnology law, Managing Intellectual Property "IP Star" and "Top 250 Women in IP" nationwide, top 50 women Massachusetts Super Lawyers, and National Law Journal's 40 Under 40.

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

A: I surprised people. I have A.B. and M.A. degrees in chemistry and a Ph.D. in biochemistry and molecular biology. Not many lawyers can say that, and not many scientists love practicing law. In my area (biotech and pharmaceutical intellectual property), my technical background matters. It helps me understand my clients' business; it helps me give them better advice. Because they did not expect it and it added value, nobody really cared that I was a girl.

I also ignored the "old boys' network." I simply did not apologize for being a woman, nor did I hide behind it. When I went part-time after having children, I didn't pretend I wasn't part-time, but I also didn't ever miss important meetings or calls. I realized and embraced that it was my responsibility to make it work.

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

A: The most significant challenges of being at a senior level within a law firm, in my experience, are gender-neutral. That said, I think many women worry that they will not be perceived as strong or effective leaders unless they "act more like men," which is often interpreted to mean being more forceful or insistent than their natural tendencies. Assessing their own value so that they are fairly compensated in the relative system of a law firm can also be challenging. In fact, for many women the concern is that they wouldn't even "know" if they were underpaid because women are reported to undervalue their own contributions and to be "satisfied" when comparably compensated men are not. There is a matter of fact machismo built in to many law firm compensation systems and women need to understand how to work in that context.

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

A: I once encountered a client who had invented a mammography device and took every opportunity to make lewd and suggestive comments about it whenever I spoke to him without a male partner present. I went to my department chair and described the experience, telling him that it made me uncomfortable. He immediately called in our managing partners, who listened to me and then called the client directly (supervisor of the relevant individual) to explain that the behavior was inappropriate and they would not permit their associate to be subjected to it. The client supervisor apologized profusely and did not allow the inventor to speak with me again unless he was supervised.

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

A: Focus on excellence. Should you encounter inappropriate or unfair behavior, be clear, direct, and reasonable in your response to it. Happily, times really are changing.

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

A: Don't hire "tokens." Identify the strongest junior women and talk to them, mentor them. Connect them with your best male mentors. Don't hire women partners just to be able to say "here's a woman." That's insulting and not at all inspiring.

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

A: Maggie Shafmaster, vice president, chief patent counsel at Sanofi-Pasteur. She always brings her highest and best self to every encounter. She is prepared for and insightful in every discussion. She impresses with her intellect and wisdom. She is demanding but always kind and fair.

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