

## Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Choate's Melissa Tearney

*Law360, New York (February 20, 2014, 3:21 PM ET)* -- Melissa Tearney is a partner in Choate Hall & Stewart LLP's government enforcement and compliance group in Boston. Her practice is currently focused on the medical device and pharmaceutical industries, where she represents both corporate executives and companies against allegations that they have violated federal statutes, such as the False Claims Act, the Anti-Kickback Statute and the Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act. She routinely represents clients before state and federal grand juries and investigative bodies and has extensive trial and appellate experience.

Tearney co-chairs Choate's hiring committee and summer program, and recently began a three-year term as president of Greater Boston Legal Services. She has been named a "Top Woman of Law" by Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly, is a Massachusetts Super Lawyer, and is listed in Best Lawyers in America.

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

A: Throughout my career, I have had the benefit of male and female mentors. Their support and advice were critical in helping me be successful. My mentors had different perspectives on the workplace, which were important for me to hear. Women sometimes gravitate to other women for their mentors, and with good reason. Senior women can, and should, help younger women in their careers. However, women should not be exclusive in choosing our mentors. Men can be excellent mentors as well, and they can help women break through barriers with helpful advice and insight.

In my experience, hard work and focus lead to success regardless of gender.

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

A: Senior women typically carry significant administrative responsibilities because firms want to make sure that a female "voice" is represented in critical decision-making processes. These responsibilities are time-consuming in addition to the demands of a busy practice, but it is important that women have a seat at the table. As women are promoted through the law firm ranks, we can more readily share these responsibilities and have a real presence in firm management.

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

A: I have been quite fortunate that these situations have been few and far between during my career. Of course, we have all heard co-workers, colleagues and clients make inappropriate remarks, and I have had to develop a high level of tolerance through the years. With that said, I have rarely experienced

sexism that has negatively impacted my career.

I frequently share the story of my first evaluation with young lawyers. I was six months into my career as a first-year associate at a large law firm. One of the senior partners at the firm submitted a highly critical evaluation of me. He reported that I was “too nice,” and my voice was “too soft” to succeed as a litigator. One of the other male partners in the litigation department became aware of my evaluation and he encouraged one of the senior female associates to mentor me. She proved to be an invaluable resource and I credit her a great deal for my success. He also encouraged me to talk about the evaluation with his partner and not to let this one evaluation deter me from my career goals.

The very next morning I walked into the partner’s office and told him that I disagreed with his evaluation. I challenged him to give me another assignment so I could prove myself to him. To his credit, he immediately agreed. So began a very successful collaboration that continued for the next 15 years.

Women cannot be easily frustrated by sexism in the workplace. We need to have confidence in our capabilities and push through challenges. We can succeed when we are determined to work hard to achieve our goals. I think of this incident often; it is one of those life lessons I draw upon when I need to motivate myself.

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

A: Stick with it. A legal career can be challenging, and you cannot let yourself be discouraged. Focus on working hard, learning your craft, and becoming invaluable to an important partner or practice area in your firm.

I have always worked full-time while raising my two children. This has not always been a choice — my husband is an M.D./Ph.D. who started his 12-year medical training right after I graduated from law school and I worked to support our family. While my career path has not always been easy, I do not regret pursuing my career while raising a family. Certain moments have been more difficult than others. Keeping the big picture in mind, I believe my 17-year-old daughter has learned that she has choices and can be successful in several facets of her life at the same time. I am certainly happy with my career and personal life and the decisions I have made. I hope that aspiring female lawyers will not give up on their careers simply because it is hard to find the right balance between their job and personal space, whether that is family or other commitments.

I also find that my community service work helps to energize and inspire me. I sit on the board of directors of several nonprofit organizations that have personal meaning to me. For example, I am currently serving as chairman of the board of directors of Greater Boston Legal Services, an organization that provides civil legal services to the poor in several areas including homelessness, benefits and domestic violence. I encourage young lawyers to find their passion and pursue their interests outside of the firm.

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

A: It is important for law firms to focus on improving training and mentoring programs for all of its associates, including women. These opportunities will keep associates engaged in the firm’s practice and satisfy them that the firm is investing in their careers. Associate retention is a continuous challenge. It costs law firms a great deal financially and otherwise to lose their super-stars prematurely.

Good mentorship programs are critical. The best mentorship relationships I have experienced, as a mentor and a mentee, are those that have developed organically. Law firms often try to “force” these relationships by choosing mentors for associates. The most successful programs allow associates to choose their mentors, and to even change mentors as their careers and mentoring needs evolve.

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

A: Ellen Rosenberg, U.S. commercial counsel at Shire Pharmaceuticals. I have worked with Ellen for over 15 years in her capacity as in-house counsel at a couple of different companies. She is an excellent lawyer. She has the uncanny ability to retain the factual details of a highly complex matter while always keeping the big strategic picture first and foremost in her mind. She once even gave me a laminated copy of the company’s key themes in a case so she could be sure I would not forget them! Ellen is extremely supportive and respectful of outside counsel and makes us feel that we are critical members of her team. She is a great role model, and it is a privilege to work with her.

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