

## Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Sheppard Mullin's Whitney Roy

*Law360, New York (April 08, 2014, 1:16 PM ET)* -- Whitney Jones Roy is managing partner of Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP's Los Angeles office and a member of the firm's recruiting committee. She is a partner in the business trial practice group. She specializes in complex business and environmental litigation, handling traditional business disputes, unfair competition, products liability, and water contamination cases. Roy's cases have related to a broad spectrum of industries including oil, financial institutions, insurance, real estate, and construction equipment. She is also a leader of the firm's Women Lawyers Group. She also oversees the firm's participation in Public Counsel's pro bono Adoptions Project, wherein attorneys volunteer to represent parents finalizing adoptions in Los Angeles County. Roy is also a member of the board of directors for the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank.

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

A: I made myself valuable to those "boys." Thankfully, as I came up through the associate ranks, I was working in a firm that was very supportive of women lawyers. That said, I needed to get the attention of key decision-makers and develop relationships with the partners (mostly men) who would champion me for partnership because they valued my contribution.

I did two primary things. First, with respect to the partners for whom I worked, I made sure that I was doing high-quality work, clocked long hours when needed, and showed them that I was as committed as they are to maintaining and growing their client relationships. Second, with respect to several key partners for whom I did not work, I volunteered to help them with nonbillable activities so that they could get to know me better and see that I was an asset to the firm — I helped plan retreats, lead the Associate Issues Committee, coached the Summer Associate Trial Advocacy Program, etc.

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

A: Time allocation is a constant struggle. As I have gotten more senior and now that I also have an administrative role, there are demands for my time in all directions. I am constantly assessing my to-do list and my calendar to determine how best to allocate my time between providing high-quality service to my clients, developing new business, fulfilling my leadership and administrative responsibilities to the firm, being a good parent and spouse, and still finding a little personal time for exercise and the occasional pedicure to maintain my sanity. You have to be militant about making sure that your time is spent on the things that you value and not wasted on unimportant things.

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

A: I had been practicing for about nine months when I was assigned to a case that was heating up for

trial. The parties were involved in a nasty partnership dissolution and a bulk of the depositions in the case had to take place while the partner I was working for was traveling in Africa, leaving me to take and defend all of the depositions. The key witnesses were all lawyers who clearly thought they knew more than me. Talk about being thrown into the deep end!

Whether it was because of my gender or my youth, opposing counsel and the opposing witnesses all thought they could take advantage of me. At first, I was incredibly intimidated. But then I had a revelation — these people were lazy and arrogant. I knew I could use that to my advantage if I quit being intimidated and looked at the whole process as a game.

First, I knew that the opposing side would never work as hard as me. Knowing the facts and the law better than anyone else gave me credibility with the judge despite being a woman and the youngest in the courtroom by several decades. Second, during the depositions, I decided to play the role of the sweet, innocent, inexperienced lawyer and it was extraordinary to see how the opposing side behaved — while using condescending terms like “honey” and “dear,” they revealed all kinds of useful information and made key admissions. I let them underestimate me while I got what I needed in the depositions.

I am not suggesting that you should always let people be rude to you and there are definitely times when you have to nip that behavior in the bud. Rather, in every situation, you have to assess which behavior and style will give you the strategic advantage.

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

A: Don't neglect your network. When you first start out as a lawyer, you are so consumed with trying to figure out how to be a good lawyer and bill enough hours. Throw in becoming a mother and you are left with precious little time to do anything else. As a result, it is easy to neglect your network of contacts and friends that you have made in school and in your professional life. This is a mistake because down the road when you are trying to grow your own book of business, developing business will be a serious challenge.

Studies have shown that women naturally have smaller networks than men, so we women have to be much more vigilant about maintaining and growing our connections. Make a commitment to yourself now to regularly have lunch with people in your network and find ways to meet new people. Put it on your to-do list just like you would assign yourself any other work-related project. This is a long-term investment. You never know who in your network will refer you that great career-making case or introduce you to your next amazing job.

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

A: Women need flexibility and support from their firms. They need to know that they can be great mothers and successful partners — the two things do not have to be mutually exclusive. Firms need to recognize that if they give women the flexibility to do this, women will stay and their careers will flourish. This flexibility can come in many forms — reduced hours expectations, the freedom to leave in the middle of the day to attend a class with their child, the ability to bring their family with them if they have to travel for work, etc.

When my son was 14 months old, I began a four-and-a-half-month trial in central California. The

prospect of being away from my son every week for so long was daunting. Thankfully, I got incredible support from both my firm and my client. I was encouraged to have my son visit frequently. We set up a complete nursery in my hotel room so that my family could easily visit. That support made a major difference. I was able to spend time with my son after court each day, put him to bed, and then crank out my prep for the next day of trial. The creative arrangement was great for everyone involved.

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

A: I have had the pleasure of seeing Sarah Weddington speak twice, and I find her incredibly inspirational. Putting aside how you feel about abortion, what Ms. Weddington has accomplished in her life is extraordinary. At just 26, facing an all-male Supreme Court and dealing with an extremely controversial and heated issue, she argued and won *Roe v. Wade*. She then followed that up with three terms in the Texas House of Representatives, service as the first female general counsel to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and then assisted President Carter.

There are two specific things that I admire about her. First, her force of will — she did not let her youth, her gender or the biases of the time get in her way, she just kept pushing as a young lawyer. Second, after having had such an extraordinary career, she has now focused her efforts on teaching women's leadership and works tirelessly to inspire the next generation of women. This is something that I think we should all do.

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