

New role, same vision.

Liisa Thomas will continue to help diverse lawyers as managing partner of Sheppard Mullin

By John McNally



Liisa Thomas has been in plenty of conference rooms since starting her legal career in 1996. She's seen plenty of friendly faces, but faces that didn't look like hers.

So when Sheppard Mullin leadership asked her to become managing partner of its Chicago office, she knew it would open up avenues to help grow her diversity, equity and inclusion goals in the marketplace.

"I really want to be a model and mentor to women of color in the legal profession. It has always been important to me," Thomas said. "When I look around the room, I can count with two fingers people who look like me.

"And I can't think of anyone who looks like me – a woman whose father is Black and mother is Jewish – in the legal equity partner (level) in the firm. So to be the person who always sticks out ... you want to be able to provide support and reach back and help others who find themselves in that situation."

"I have an opportunity to do that in this role."

FINDING YOUR FLOW

Thomas – who also is an adjunct professor at Northwestern Pritzker School of Law – has been an inspiration and mentor to other diverse attorneys since she was a senior associate. She's always there to answer someone's question, but she has developed a website (www.careercharting.com) with her eight steps for career and personal growth. They include: "I found my posse," "I found the word 'no,'" and "I found my why."

"If you can find work that makes you feel like you're living a calling and gives you a sense of autonomy, those are very motivational," she said.

Flow is also another tenet of Thomas' eight career-improving steps. The idea is that you're doing something so intellectually engaging that you feel energized about it.

Thomas believes that this was critical for her success. She also put her theory to the test while doing a graduate study on rainmakers at law firms. The data she collected confirmed that these high dollar-making lawyers have a true passion and zest for the work that they do, which has led to great success.

"There is a bunch of research showing that people who are successful in their career, no matter what they are, have more of those attributes (and) they can be developed. It's not as if you're born with it or you're not."

Thomas is proud of Sheppard Mullin achieving Diversity Labs' Mansfield Certification+ with 30% women, lawyers of color, LGBTQ+ lawyers, and attorneys with disabilities in leadership roles for the fourth straight year. While working at Northwestern, she focused her research on how to grow the diverse ranks of the "rainmaker" level at law firms.

"They are the leaders or the de facto leaders," she said. "We can't forget that piece of the puzzle. Pipeline issues and retention issues those are critical (too)."

She added: "Being mindful of how we can support people into excelling in those (rainmaker) roles, then we can see our leadership role diversify."



Liisa Thomas
Managing Partner, Sheppard Mullin

ANOTHER MAJOR MOVE COMING

One of the first major moves – quite literally – Thomas will oversee is Sheppard Mullin's relocation this year to 321 N. Clark St. In the 10 years since launching Sheppard Mullin, the firm has outgrown its 70 W. Madison St. headquarters and Thomas sat on the design committee for the new location.

"It was really interesting to be thinking about the physical office of the future ... while we were very much working from home," she said.

Thomas says the firm currently is and will continue to be "living in a different world" when Sheppard Mullin officially moves to 321 N. Clark St. Thomas says that will include the firm being "more intentional about seeing people in person."

REGULAR WORK CONTINUES

Privacy, cybersecurity and intellectual property are the main focus of Thomas' practice, including writing two treatises on data breaches. One, "Thomas on Data Breach: A Practical Guide to Handling Worldwide Data Breach Notification" is going into its 10th edition. She is excited to add responsibilities as managing partner and is thankful for the staff she knows she'll lean on to lead the Chicago office.

"I'm quite lucky. They are able to do a lot of stuff and you have to let them shine and excel," she said. "My practice will not change."

Thomas' clients need help navigating data breaches and being compliant with certain data laws. With new laws enacted in many different states, Thomas has been diligent in creating a more flexible way for her clients to adapt to new laws.

"I've been working on managing the development and growth of their privacy compliance programs to adapt to what is clearly going to be an ever-changing compliance landscape," she said.

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