

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Allen Matkins' Sandi Nichols



Law360, New York (April 14, 2014, 11:45 AM ET) -- Sandi L. Nichols serves as chairwoman of Allen Matkins Leck Gamble Mallory & Natsis LLP's environmental and natural resources group and previously served on the firm's management committee. Before joining Allen Matkins in 2007, she was the managing partner of another environmental and real estate firm, and the California offices' managing partner of the regional firm into which that firm was merged.

Her practice focuses on environmental litigation and counseling. She has served as lead counsel in high-stakes litigation over contaminated soil, sediments, groundwater, and surface waters. She also counsels clients on environmental and real estate matters arising in connection with the acquisition, sale, development and repurposing of real property, including the investigation and management of vapor intrusion into indoor air stemming from contaminated soil and groundwater. Her clients have included large commercial, retail, and industrial developers, ports, oil companies, and utilities.

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

A: I never really felt like I was "breaking into" an old boys' network when I became a lawyer. Since I was in grade school, I have enjoyed "hanging out" and competing with "the guys" (though beating them didn't make me an attractive choice for a date!) and have always felt comfortable and confident doing so. Early on in my career, I was fortunate to have some very supportive male mentors who promoted me to their clients and who afforded me excellent opportunities on challenging cases, which in turn helped me to establish a reputation and develop my own book of business. Of course, it didn't hurt that I am an avid sports fan and enjoy engaging in baseball and football banter!

My path to firm leadership — in a then-100 percent male partnership — began simply by working hard and doing good work. It was obvious that I enjoyed the challenges of law practice and the company of my colleagues and wanted to be a valuable member of our litigation team. I sought out opportunities to lead cases and to participate on committees.

After I had my second son, I asked the then-managing partner if I could work an 80 percent schedule — not common in those days and not necessarily wise just months before I was to be put up for partner. He agreed, and I worked hard to demonstrate that I was no less devoted to my career, the firm and our

clients. After three years, I returned to full-time because I was ready and my caseload demanded it. Another named partner, who had not been a fan of the part-time arrangement, later nominated me to become the firm's first elected managing partner and its first female managing partner because, he said, "I can always count on you to tend to business."

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

A: The challenges of being a more experienced partner (note that I try to avoid referring to myself as a "senior" anything!) are largely the same regardless of gender: serving as a role model and mentor to younger lawyers and making the time to provide them with meaningful feedback; maintaining enough challenging work for good clients to provide training for more junior lawyers and to keep things interesting for not-so-junior lawyers; maintaining an atmosphere of camaraderie and a support system that recognizes the challenges of balancing family and career; and actively working to ensure the firm's continued growth and reputation for excellence and financial well-being. That, and keeping a sense of humor too!

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

A: There were times when I was an associate when I felt that opposing or co-counsel underestimated me simply because I was a young woman. One example was when I served as the lead trial counsel on a matter for a land use attorney who had brought my firm into a case as co-counsel. After I gave the closing argument in our bench trial and the judge ruled in our favor, we walked out of the courtroom and he remarked, "Sandi, you're no lady lawyer!" I could sense that he intended it as a compliment, so I smiled and thanked him, and did not feel comfortable pointing out the sexist nature of his remark. Instead, I decided to adopt a "don't take offense, take advantage" approach. In my view, there is much more to be gained simply by demonstrating a commitment to the highest level of professionalism ... and winning too!

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

A: The advice I would give to an aspiring attorney would generally be the same regardless of gender — choose a field that you are passionate about and pursue it. Choose a firm that will give you the opportunities to become an expert in the field, then do what it takes to become an expert — seek out work from partners who are experts in the field; work diligently to learn the law and the "tools of the trade," take the initiative to identify issues, develop strategies, work with client teams, and demonstrate that you are a valuable member of the team. Develop networks early on. Building relationships will be essential to developing business, and developing business will likely be essential to becoming an equity partner (if that's the goal) and will be rewarding regardless. Never forget the importance of family and friends. Find a supportive partner to help create the right work-life balance.

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

A: Increasing the number of women in law firms, as in some other professions, is becoming more challenging. For the first time in years, law schools are experiencing a decline in female applicants. Some women lawyers are opting out to pursue less demanding careers or to stay at home with children. And making partner in law firms has become increasingly difficult for males and females alike. So, to retain talented young women and enable them to become partners, I believe firms would benefit by (1) providing opportunities for women lawyers to work for important firm clients and on high-profile matters; (2) providing opportunities to serve on firm committees and in other leadership roles; (3) supporting female-focused mentoring and business development activities; and (4) working creatively where necessary to accommodate the need for more flexible work schedules (which could mean, e.g., part-time or working from home at certain times) — partnership track may be longer, but part-time should not necessarily mean "off track."

Allen Matkins has done a good job of creating and implementing programs designed to support and promote our women lawyers both internally and externally, including women-based networking and professional recognition groups and events, some of which are lead by our women associates. We have women partners serving on the management committee and other key committees. And we employ a number of women lawyers who work part time. More time will tell whether these efforts will produce more women partners; in the meanwhile, they are building relationships and business too.

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

A: Rep. Jackie Speier, D-Calif., a fellow UC Hastings alum, is someone I admire for her dedication and commitment to public service and for her incredible resilience in overcoming adversity in the political arena and in her personal life too. After law school, Jackie became a congressional aide and survived the Jonestown, Guyana (People's Temple) massacre, where she was shot and left for dead on the tarmac. Later, while she was a member of the California State Assembly and pregnant with her second child, her husband was killed in a car accident. Jackie raised two wonderful children, while continuing to serve in the state Senate and then the U.S. Congress, where she is a tireless advocate on issues of importance to her and to her constituents. She is a true inspiration.

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