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Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: McGuireWoods' Sidney Kanazawa

Law360, New York (November 24, 2014, 10:24 AM ET) -- Sidney Kanazawa is a Los Angeles-based partner with McGuireWoods LLP and has resolved thousands of disputes, including more than 2,000 within three months of a massive oil spill. In November 2014, he and the firm were awarded the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association's 2014 President's Award for Kanazawa's years of service as NAPABA's pro bono general counsel and for the firm's pro bono legal work on behalf of NAPABA and its annual sponsorship of two fellowships for the NAPABA Law Foundation. Kanazawa is a fellow of the Litigation Counsel of America, a sustaining member of the Product Liability Advisory Counsel, an invited member of the American Law Institute and the Maritime Law Association, and serves as chairman of the Diversity Subcommittee of the ABA Standing Committee on Continuing Legal Education. He is a member of the Diversity and Inclusion Committee at McGuireWoods and chairman of the firm's Asian Pacific Lawyers' Network.



Sidney Kanazawa

As a participant in Law360's Minority Powerbrokers Q&A series, Kanazawa shared his perspective on five questions:

Q: How did you break the glass ceiling in the legal industry?

A: I don't think the ceiling has been broken. When I enter the courtroom to try a case, I am still an anomaly. And when I participate in lawyer organizations (other than ethnic bars), I am still often the only Asian in the room (especially among litigators). We are not there yet. But we are on our way. My own journey began with a tough taskmaster — Ken Chiate — who would be my mentor and colleague for more than 25 years. I learned to be a trial lawyer under his tutelage. His guidance and trust in me would open doors of opportunity that I repaid with diligent work and loyalty. John McHose, Gordon Wright, Larry Bradley, Ralph ("Kyle") Kirwan, Sam Wilner, Dick Cogswell and Dan Minter were also fabulous mentors who taught me invaluable lessons about integrity, sincerity, kindness, friendship and how to have fun. They also showed me the importance of networking beyond the firm. Mr. McHose used to say, "Don't join an organization unless you intend to be in the leadership." Mr. Wright would remind me of the importance of maintaining friends outside of the law — "You're useless to us if you only associate with lawyers. You need to maintain friends outside of the law so that you can understand our clients and our jurors." He would also say, "Be nice to the opposing lawyer. Without him [all were men back then] you don't have a job." These early lessons would give me the

courage to try cases many thought could not be won, to reach leadership positions in the state bar and other associations, to be inducted into invitation only organizations, and to connect with a wide array of clients, opponents and friends who have been more than kind to me.

Q: What are the challenges of being a lawyer of color at a senior level?

A: How to share all that you have learned without preaching or being a bore.

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

A: Since I left Hawaii to go to law school, feeling different and not quite fitting in has been a constant. At my first summer internship, an ex-military white male associate buddy who was extremely critical and unfriendly turned around when I kept up with him on the skeet range at a firm picnic. A client assigned the early task of diversifying his outside counsel once told me that I don't count because I'm Asian. Back then, minority meant African-American and little else. I could only smile and press on with the work that I was doing to earn his trust and confidence. The concept of advertising and boasting about your achievements and the Western concept of "one way" and "one truth" runs directly counter to the Asian and island mentality of harmony and humility. I found I could not fake what I was not and instead adapted by promoting the accomplishments of colleagues and describing my own accomplishments in the context of making an objective point. I also found that the Western concept is not what it seems either. When we settle 98 percent of the cases without a final determination of the "truth" we can hardly be called a system of "one truth."

Q: What advice would you give to a lawyer of color?

A: Try your best and do it with a good heart. That was the advice my father gave me as a young child. He used to tell me that I can't always be the best but I can always try my best and I can always act with empathy and appreciation for others before looking out for myself. If you try your best, you'll have no regrets. You'll look forward, not back. Consistently, my father named me Sidney after the drunken lawyer in Tale of Two Cities who substitutes himself for the guillotine for a friend in love. As lawyers of color, we do not have a choice. We must try our best. We will regret anything less. Anything less will not only indict our own inadequacy but also that of all who are like us. And we cannot forget to respect and appreciate those that helped us be where we are, including those who have impeded our progress. Both our supporters and our detractors are creating opportunities unavailable to us if we were just one of the majority. Nelson Mandela brought his country together by recognizing that the prejudice and bias that imprisoned him also imprisoned his oppressors. We too can bring disparate parties together, if we act with selfless compassion rather than selfish righteousness.

Lawyers of color are at both a disadvantage and an advantage. You are different and the majority population has developed stories and biases — often negative — centered on those differences. But it is because you are different that you also hold a tremendous advantage over those in the majority population. When everyone sees and thinks the same, they often miss the obvious standing right in front of them. Lawyers of color are not so burdened. To survive, we must see the world through our own eyes and through the eyes of the majority.

Use your difference as an advantage. Our role as lawyers is not to divide. Our role is to remind our fellow citizens of our commonality and to find a way to sheathe our differences so that we can live together without killing each other. Whether it is transactional work or litigation, we are agreement makers. Difference is essential. Without difference and creativity we as a society will become stagnant and this magical experiment in freedom

and democracy will die. Being a lawyer of color gives you the perspective to appreciate, promote and perpetuate this precious dynamic.

Q: What advice would you give to a law firm looking to increase diversity in its partner ranks?

A: Just do it. You're missing a lot if you don't. And you'll have no clue about the perspectives you're missing until you do. It is not about looking good or attracting business. It is about seeing more and thinking smart. But it must be sincere. It must be inclusive. And it must be sustainable. It is not easy to break through biases but the benefits are immeasurable for all.

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