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SPOTLIGHT: FINDING UNITY IN DIVERSITY

MAYDA COLON TSAKNIS, THE HONORABLE JEANNIE J. HONG, AND JENNIFER MAREE

By
Sabrina Khan

While the women I interviewed have distinct racial and ethnic backgrounds, unique legal careers, and a wide array of perspectives, each is an inspirational trailblazer who overcame multiple obstacles in order to achieve success. The women shared with me their distinguished histories and revealed how differences in gender and culture impact one's legal experiences. As a current law student, I was impressed by their passion for the law and their remarkable contributions to the legal field. As a female minority law student, I was able to identify with their battles and left each interview with a new appreciation for my own history, gender and ethnicity.

As a young Hispanic attorney, Mayda Colón Tsaknis noticed a significant need to deal with legal issues unique to the Hispanic community, and so founded the Maryland Hispanic Bar Association in 1993. She quickly became its first president. Colón Tsaknis was born and raised in Puerto Rico and attended St. Mary's University School of Law in Texas. Soon after graduation, she joined the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's first trial team. She then became General Counsel for the Puerto Rican Federal Affairs Administration ("PRFAA"). Colón Tsaknis now practices in Rockville, Maryland, at the fully bilingual women's law firm she created in 1992.

When The Honorable Jeannie J. Hong was sworn in on August 14, 2002 to the District Court of Maryland in Baltimore, she became the first female Asian American judge in Maryland. She was born in Seoul, South Korea and immigrated to the United States at age 2. After growing up in Centreville, Virginia, she graduated from American University, Washington College of Law in 1992. Hong spent eight vibrant years as an Assistant State's Attorney for the Baltimore City State's Attorney's Office in the Juvenile Division before taking her seat on the bench.

Jennifer Maree, an Associate Attorney at Patton Boggs LLP, is the current President of the Women's Bar Association of the District of Columbia, which is now celebrating its 91st anniversary. After having spent her childhood moving throughout the Western United States, she received her Juris Doctorate from American University, Washington College of Law in 2001. Before joining Patton Boggs, Maree was an Honors Attorney at the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation.

MAYDA COLON TSAKNIS

When did you decide that you wanted to pursue a career in law, and what were some of the motivational forces behind that decision?

My family raised my three siblings and me to believe that men and women were identical in terms of professional capability. While I was growing up, it was unusual to see many female lawyers in the states, however that was not the case in Puerto Rico; I was used to seeing female lawyers around. For a long time I envisioned myself becoming an attorney because I be-

lieved that profession really fit my personality. I was determined to go to law school either in my country or elsewhere.

Could you recall a professional experience when you were particularly self-conscious of or inhibited by your sex and/or race?

In regards to gender, not so much. But race, yes. The other attorneys on the first trial team of the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ("EEOC") consisted of six or seven Caucasians and African Americans. Regardless of the fact that it was racially diverse, I felt like I was treated as an unequal. I also stood out for my accent. To compensate for that, I was always very well-prepared. This made me not feel intimidated even when, for example, I represented the government by myself against corporations who hired ten or so attorneys. I carried the confidence I gained from that experience into my future endeavors.

You mentioned that your accent influenced how you were received in court. Would you mind elaborating?

One of my law school professors once told me, "I believe your accent will be an asset with a jury." I have found that to be very true. The fact that it is something different makes people listen more carefully to me. Once, however, a federal judge in D.C. stated, "Speak English. I don't understand you." This was very offensive so I asked, "Your Honor, I would like to please know whether your saying this is going to be prejudicial to my client because you have a bias." He was totally taken aback and apologized, claiming he didn't mean it that way. We have since become very good friends and he hasn't asked me about my accent again!

Would you please briefly outline the history of Maryland's Hispanic Bar Association (MHBA)--particularly your role in its foundation and as its first president? How did you deal with some of the challenges you faced?

I went through the Maryland Lawyers' Manual to identify some Hispanic attorneys, wrote letters asking them to be the first members of the MHBA, and explained the need for a Hispanic Bar Association in our state to protect the rights of our people. Our first agenda in 1993 focused on the issue of the interpreters. There had previously been no minimum qualifications for Spanish interpreters in Maryland so courts could not always distinguish which ones were credible. The Washington Post's coverage of the MHBA's initiative to make some minimum qualification requirements generated a lot of publicity and our testimony to Congress helped us eventually achieve our goal of having very good interpreters in court.

There were some non-Hispanics who felt that there shouldn't be a separate bar association for Hispanics because general associations were sufficient. I disagreed and told them that we have certain needs particular to us. A group of people in the larger community greatly benefit from our (the MHBA's) interpretation of legal issues.

Famous scholars, perhaps most notably Samuel Huntington, have asserted that the Latino/Hispanic population in our country is severely insulated due to linguistic and cultural differences, and therefore, unlike past immigrant populations, will not integrate well into American society. Do you agree or disagree, and why?

People should not lump all Hispanics together. There are professional Hispanics, and Hispanics who have not had the opportunity to be educated to the same degree. There is a large group of Hispanic immigrants, the first generation, who only got the chance to complete up to fifth or sixth grade levels of education in their mother countries. They deserve a lot of credit because in an effort to provide their children with the best opportunities possible, they have come to a country which primarily uses English, one of the most difficult languages to learn, and often work multiple menial jobs that nobody else wants. They are so busy trying to maintain their families that they have no time or means by which to improve their English. After all every first-generation population is a little isolated, not because they want to be, but because the general population forces them to be isolated. However I think people in the general population are increasingly willing to take the time to not only understand, but even embrace, the Hispanic culture. We are a very warm people who take well to this.

THE HONORABLE JEANNIE J. HONG

As a first-generation Asian American woman, did you feel pressure from your community and/ or family to pursue certain professions?

Around the time I was born, there weren't many career opportunities available to women in Korea. Their expected aspirations were mainly to get married. My parents had two daughters for whom they wanted to provide better opportunities so we came to the States. That's why they sometimes acted like the stereotypical Asian parents who pushed their children to become professionals.

Why did you choose this career path?

My father always aspired to become a judge and was intrigued with the law so during my first year as an undergraduate student at The University of Virginia, he handed me an LSAT book and said, "Start studying!" I think it was always engineered into me to pursue this career. But after all that I've learned and done, I am very glad that I did.

As the first Asian-American female judge in Maryland, were you constantly reminded of your racial and cultural background in the courthouse?

Oh yes, very much. In Maryland I am one of only two Asian American judges, the other being Judge Brian Kim in Montgomery County. When I first got on the bench, I felt like I wasn't just Jeanie Hong, but really Jeanie Hong the representative of my entire group of people. There was a lot of pressure for my actions, demeanor, and the way I dressed not only reflect me, but all Asians in general. That's why especially in the beginning, I really made an assertive effort to be professional, respectful, and dress very nicely because I felt like I was being observed under a microscope. It didn't help that the stereotype that Asians look younger than their age actually applied to me. I

was thirty-six years old when I began this job so when I entered the courthouse my first day, the people at the entrance pointed me in the direction of the law clerks' office! I've been doing this for six and a half years now so I think everyone is used to seeing me around. However I think there are always some hurdles, especially as a young woman trying to gain a reputation for herself, and this is regardless of race.

Do you think your heritage influences your work? If so, how?

Even though I have to evaluate everyone equally, I come from a different cultural perspective which helps me understand the dynamics of certain cases well. For example, it's rare but every once in a while I hear a criminal case involving Koreans pooling their money together in what is called *keh*, a practice that has been in our culture for generations. In one situation, somebody cheated everyone else out of the money, so another member of the group assaulted him. Because I understood the culture, I believe I understood what happened in a different way than someone who may not have ever been familiar with that idea beforehand. Also in regards to domestic violence cases, I think I understand why Asian women can often be more reticent to come to court. They often fear losing face for the family.

You have two children and an intense job as a federal judge in a bustling metropolis with very busy dockets. How do you balance all your obligations, whether they be familial, professional, personal, etc.?

Prioritizing is key. I could not do this without the support of family. As you embark on your legal career, you'll see that through periods of your life, things will ebb and flow. For example, when women have children, the brunt of child-rearing, overseeing homework, and similar things may make them feel like they cannot participate in as many associations as they'd like. You will always have to balance multiple commitments but like I said, prioritizing them and keeping the ebb and flow idea in mind is important.

JENNIFER MAREE

You have been an active member of both the American Bar Association (ABA) and the Women's Bar Association (WBA). Besides that the WBA caters specifically to women, how would you distinguish its culture from that of the ABA?

I appreciated the fact that the ABA promoted networking and career-building experiences. However as a woman, I didn't really feel like my voice was heard as well as it should have been. Sometimes at ABA events, guys would approach me and speak to me in ways that probably weren't the most professional. That's why I joined the WBA. I felt much more comfortable in that setting, like everyone was on an even playing field. We were there to progress causes particular to women in our field about which I felt strongly. It was nice to be treated completely as an equal.

Today, while the U.S. bans gender discrimination, glass ceilings and other mechanisms used to suppress women remain prevalent throughout many professions, including the law. Have you or any of your female colleagues faced professional challenges due to your gender?

Absolutely. Of course it's in subtle ways. Even firms and other legal organizations which especially pride themselves on diversity in terms of numbers, that's both racial and gender-wise, have it built into their inner workings.

How would you advise women to deal with such situations in their legal careers?

My advice is to be persistent, be patient, and assertive while maintaining a sense of humor about any awkward or frustrating situation into which you're put. It's important to especially remember to be assertive so that we may dispel stereotypes of us being quiet and submissive, and convey to our male colleagues that we notice if we are not being treated as equals.

True or false: Women have it harder than men in the working world. How about the legal world?

It's difficult to generalize but I feel that women definitely have it harder than men in the working, including the legal, world. Typically, though not always, women have to balance taking care of children and managing the household activities with work. If your schedule is like mine, which is the average at a large law firm, you spend most of your time at work! This, combined with the fact that women have to work harder to assert ourselves, can sometimes transform work into quite an uphill battle. However it's one definitely worth fighting.

The term 'feminist' has been both celebrated and stigmatized. Do you consider yourself a feminist? How would you define the term?

Oh yes, I'd definitely say I'm a feminist and I'm proud to call myself one. Too often women shy away from claiming to

be feminists because they may fear that guys will think they are the types to take issue with every single innocent thing they say and turn their statements into sexist remarks. What I think is the true definition of feminist, however, is simply someone who stands up for the equal rights of women. There's nothing anyone should ever be ashamed of in that. Keep in mind that I've also met quite a few male feminists.

You graduated from WCL, founded by the same women who played a large part in the creation of the National Women's Bar Association--do you believe this history helps strengthen women's ability to assert themselves in the legal profession?

WCL, more so than probably many other law schools, offers so many courses, extracurricular activities, and clinical programs which specifically promote women's rights. I'm not saying that just because a female law student doesn't participate in them does not mean she does not do so in her own way outside of school. But I certainly suggest that everyone, not only the female students, check them out. I feel the same way about any other law school experiences, like clubs, which enhance our understanding of diversity issues. I can't emphasize how important it is to always be cognizant of the different perspectives people bring to the table in our everyday and professional discussions.



(from left to right) Teresa Godwin Phelps (Director of Legal Rhetoric, Professor at the Washington College of Law), Jamie Abrams (Professor at the Washington College of Law and author of *Banding Together: Reflections of the Role of the Women's Bar Association of the District of Columbia and the Washington College of Law in Promoting Women's Rights*), and Erica Lounsberry (law student at the Washington College of Law).