

Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: SMGQ Law's Emilia Quesada

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Emilia A. Quesada is a founding partner of Sanchez-Medina Gonzalez Quesada Lage Crespo Gomez Machado & Preira LLP (SMGQ Law), based in Miami, Florida. She practices in the area of complex commercial litigation, with specialized knowledge in insurance coverage, life, health, disability and ERISA matters, as well as banking litigation and products liability defense. Quesada has represented various Fortune 500 companies throughout her career in state and federal courts throughout Florida. She is AV-rated by Martindale-Hubbell Peer Review Ratings.

Quesada served as one of 12 commissioners appointed to the American Bar Association's Commission on Women in the Profession, and was the first Hispanic appointed from the State of Florida. She has been recognized in various publications, including Attorney at Law magazine's Women in Law edition, MCCA's Diversity & the Bar magazine, and Diversity Inc. magazine. Quesada was highlighted as a Hispanic leader by Miami Today and South Florida CEO magazine, and named to Florida Trend's Florida Legal Elite and a Top Lawyer in Litigation by the South Florida Legal Guide. She is an active member of the Defense Research Institute and the National Association of Minority and Women-Owned Law Firms (NAMWOLF), where she was recently appointed co-chairwoman of the Insurance PAC.



Emilia A. Quesada

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

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

A: I was very fortunate to have excellent mentors who believed in me and my abilities early on in my career. At my first Big Law position as a second-year lawyer, after completing an honors attorney federal clerkship through the Attorney General Honors Program, I was mentored by a senior equity female partner who truly valued my drive, work ethic and confidence. She challenged me with difficult projects and allowed me to engage in all aspects of litigation, from arguing hearings to taking depositions as a very young lawyer, something rarely seen in Big Law.

Being trained at the best law firms in Miami by excellent litigators solidified my experience and provided me with a platform to start generating business. The support I received from the law firms I worked at, which included allowing me to attend conferences geared toward the hiring of women and minority lawyers such as Minority Corporate Counsel Association and Corporate Counsel Women of Color, helped open doors to new clients and business relationships which provided me the self-assurance needed to start my own firm eight years ago, where I continue to grow and provide legal services to Fortune 500 clients and other businesses throughout Florida.

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

A: While I served on the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession, the organization published the study “Visible Invisibility: Women of Color in Law Firms,” which analyzed the attrition rates of women of color attorneys in private practice. The results were demoralizing, and highlighted the fact that women of color suffer the most harm in law firm settings. According to the National Association for Law Placement, minorities hold only 5.4 percent of law firm partner positions among the ranks of the nation’s major law firms. The numbers are even more disturbing for minority women, who hold only 1.5 percent of partner positions. Law firms have a long way to go before equality is achieved in the workplace. For those few women of color who do survive and get promoted to partnership ranks, significant challenges remain, including work-life balance issues and intimidation from male partners, particularly when women generate business and are perceived as a threat.

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

A: To this day, after 18 years of practicing law in countless courtrooms throughout the state of Florida, when I walk into the courtroom and check in with the bailiff, the bailiff assumes I am the court reporter. And, to this day, I get exhilarated when I advise that I am, in fact, the attorney for the multibillion-dollar corporation who hired me to represent them in the complex case being litigated. Discrimination is an unfortunate reality, but I find that the prejudice is more geared to the fact that I am a woman, as opposed to a minority.

I experienced the greatest discrimination at one particular law firm after I started generating a significant amount of business. While the male partners who traveled to grow their business were supported by the firm and rewarded for their efforts, there was a definite double standard. I encountered push-back, was questioned about the necessity of certain trips, and was challenged when I wanted to engage in networking events that were geared exclusively towards women. The resistance was surprising to me, considering that I always saw my success as the firm’s success, especially since the firm would reap the financial rewards of the relationships being established. Needless to say, I did not let anyone or anything get in the way of increasing business opportunities, and would urge lawyers to do whatever it takes to meet clients, existing and potential. Ultimately, your worth and ability to grow in the partnership ranks is inevitably tied to your ability to establish a book of business.

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

A: Never take “no” for an answer. Push yourself to the limit. Be the best you that you can be, regardless of naysayers and negativity. Surround yourself with people who believe in you, and if you cannot find those people at the firm you are at, find it in other resources and organizations, and come to the realization that firm may not be the right fit for you. If you come to that conclusion, it is not the end of the world. Cast your net and find a firm that will invest in you, just as you are investing yourself in them.

Build a strong network, not only of business contacts, but friends. Do not burn bridges, no matter what. A perceived enemy can one day become your greatest ally. And, above all, be genuine, kind, polite and respectful to everyone, from the most senior partner to the cleaning crew. All eyes are on you, so show them what you're truly made of.

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

A: When recruiting, make diversity a top priority and groom your already existing diverse lawyers for success. Get to know your talent pool on a personal level, and embrace the fact that women and minorities bring a fresh perspective garnered by their unique experiences that enhance client relationships. Provide mentors to your diverse attorneys who will prepare them for all aspects of success within the firm, partners who have key roles in hiring, promoting and equity level access. Those are the partners who know the "ins and outs" of how to be successful because they have achieved that status themselves, not just within their own practice area, but firmwide.

Give diverse lawyers opportunities to travel to networking events that are geared toward the hiring of diverse talent. Allow them to meet clients and provide networking opportunities within the firm itself by introducing them to many firm partners, not just the few they may be assigned to work with. Teach your diverse lawyers how to generate business, and identify their weaknesses so that you can provide the strength they need to be successful. Their success is ultimately yours. It is a win-win situation.

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