

LATINO PARTNER'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE NEED FOR MORE LATINO LAWYERS*

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When one considers the number of Latinos in large law firms, there is clearly a need to increase the numbers; I would like to help de-mystify the process by sharing with you my own experiences. I take this approach to emphasize to those of you considering this type of career that you must do so with your eyes open. When I began my career at a large firm I did not know what I was getting into and learning by accident is not the best way to learn.

The process of de-mystification must first take into account the recruitment and hiring phenomenon. Recruitment and hiring of Latinos and other minorities at large firms is, for the most part, tokenism. There is no sincere, as far as I am concerned, large scale effort to recruit minorities in large firms. That is not to say that there is not any effort; rather, the effort is simply inadequate. Part of the reason is that large firms look at the population of Latino law school graduates in the context of the "super-star" syndrome. If they do not identify you through a combination of factors as a super-star, then it is going to be difficult for minority law students to get hired by a large law firm. Yet, there are exceptions. I certainly do not consider myself to have been a super-star student!

When I graduated from UCLA in 1978 there were different criteria in the process of recruitment and hiring. While there are some remnants of that process, we have to focus on what is happening today because the process is economy-driven, and therefore recession-driven. I do not want to discourage anyone from pursuing employment with large firms, including people who do not consider themselves super-stars. However you will have to

* A version of this speech was delivered at the UCLA School of Law on Feb. 6, 1993.

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be pro-active and assertive if you want to pursue this particular type of career opportunity.

Hiring has been slowed by the recession. Firms are contracting in every aspect of the business of law, including the area of recruitment and hiring. This shrinkage impacts Latinos and Latinas in the prospective applicant pool most immediately and—most negatively. In addition, hiring partners visiting UCLA and other law schools assume that the majority of all the Latinos they interview got into law school through lowered standards which they equate with the affirmative action process. This attitude continues to be prevalent despite the fact that some of the Latinos they are interviewing may be more qualified than some of the non-Latinos they are interviewing. Putting aside for a moment the comparison of grades, social and economic factors, and family background, which mitigate one way or another, it is fair and honest to say that many of the hiring partners have some level of bias. While there are partners who are not biased, those partners are, in my opinion, the exception to the rule.

Firms also have an attitude about their roster and letterhead, which is to some extent recession-driven. When the firms have a couple of minority attorneys, they believe that they do not need any more. Every firm has a couple of “us”; it makes people comfortable to have a couple of “us” sprinkled within the work place at the associate level. In doing so, they feel that they have fulfilled their minimal obligations to society. “A couple of us” is the general standard for large firms. Again, there are exceptions.

I spent thirteen years at Mitchell, Silberburg and Knupp, which is a fairly large law firm, established 85 to 90 years ago. When I left in 1991—at the height of what I considered to be the socialization and consciousness-raising of that law firm—there were approximately ten Latino lawyers at the firm. I considered that to be unprecedented by Los Angeles standards. I was a partner and there were eight or nine associates. Those eight or nine associates have now scattered and have either gone to other large firms, to positions as in-house counsel, to smaller firms or into solo practice. I do not think, by any means, that it is only because I left Mitchell, Silberburg and Knupp that they now have only one Latino associate. I *do* think that it is fair to say that my leaving had *some* impact on their ability to recruit, hire and retain Latino lawyers at the firm.

Another issue we must bear in mind as Latinos is that our frame of reference is wholly different from most who seek to work in large firms. I did not grow up with a father who was a lawyer or a mother who was a judge. Although there are Latinos in Los Angeles County who have parents that fit those two ca-

reer models, I was not one of them. I was not one of those students who raise their hand in every class, and quote from books I did not have or knew where to find. Those students sat in the front row and were very intimidating to those of us who sat in the back of the classroom, in what we used to call "the barrio." Things, however, are beginning to change. You are a class of students that I think is more sophisticated than we were. Overall, you are brighter; your LSAT scores are better; you have stronger GPAs. You had to be much more competitive. Yet in law school, you get the impression that everyone else knows what is happening except you, that everyone is comfortable except you. You will find that this is not necessarily true. It certainly is not an absolute. Most importantly, whatever culture shock you experience in law school will be exponential at a large firm. The key is remembering that this is true for everyone in that class of first year lawyers. Everyone feels out of place. We (Latinos) just feel it to a greater degree. Clerking during summers will smooth over some of the difficulties of integrating into a law firm culture and environment.

There are several reasons why you should consider working for a large firm if you have not already done so. The first is that a quality firm will give you the best training. I was taken under the wing of a very bright but demanding partner; actually it was more like a head-lock. The second reason is marketability. Two or three years after working at a large firm, you will be at the peak of marketability as a young associate. You can go from one of the large firms or medium size quality firms to almost anywhere in the job market. You will be as marketable as you can be, even in this recession-driven economy. The third reason used to be job security—or the most job security presently available. However, these days there are partners on the street with resumes in hand as they hike from one skyscraper to another. Of course, there are associates in the same position. Furthermore, Latinos are likely to be in the "last hired, first fired" pack, so job security is no longer a strong factor for seeking work at a large firm.

In short, working at a large firm can be great. The rewards are definitely there. You will also get an expanded sphere of influence by working in a large firm. However it can also be stressful and can ruin family life. At a minimum, large firm work will impose on the normalcy of family life. Thus the quality of life at a firm can be a double-edged sword even under the best of circumstances. In sum, I hope that my experiences and opinions about the culture of large firm work have given you some information that might help you in your career decisions.