

Female Powerbrokers Q&A: Gordon & Rees' Leslie Benitez

Law360, New York (June 12, 2014, 10:46 AM ET) -- [Leslie A. Benitez](#) is co-managing partner of [Gordon & Rees LLP's Austin](#), Texas, office. She began her career in 1977 at the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, Texas' supreme court for criminal cases. After several years, she moved to the Texas Office of the Attorney General, where she did appellate work and argued cases in federal appeals courts, including the [U.S. Supreme Court](#). She also served as chief of the Law Enforcement Division, overseeing a staff of attorneys representing the state of Texas in state and federal court litigation. After the Texas attorney general became governor, Benitez was asked to serve as the governor's general counsel, where she was a member of the governor's senior staff and advised him on statewide legal issues.

After 10 years of government service, Benitez entered private practice. Before joining Gordon & Rees, she practiced at an Austin-based firm, where she served multiple terms on the management committee.

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

A: When I started my legal career almost 37 years ago, it was a different world for women. Male law school classmates said to our faces that we were taking up spaces needed by men who would have to support families. There were judges on the state's highest courts who made no pretense that they would not hire women as law clerks. We "lady lawyers," as some called us, were a novelty to some judges and older male lawyers. I was used to being the only female in the courtroom or meeting room. I made my way, however, and gained respect of colleagues, judges and clients by out-working and out-preparing everyone else. I developed some creative legal strategies to win cases by out-maneuvering the other side. I gained credibility with a no-nonsense demeanor and hard work. They could not help but notice that. Women during those years made strides one brief, one argument, one case at a time. You had to be pretty tough.

Things are different now. A lot more women are judges, in-house lawyers and leaders in law firms. There still are challenges for women, but I have found over the last number of years that many clients value women on their teams, and law firms value women in leadership roles.

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

A: Some of the challenges that senior women in law firms face are the same that men face, but for different reasons. Both need to nurture and develop client relationships. But let's face it — it can be awkward for women to have one-on-one social meetings with male clients. So you have to be creative, and that's where being a part of a good team comes in — you can work with your team to develop these opportunities. Also, as a senior female attorney, you sometimes are expected to be a standard-bearer for other women. That's great most of the time, but you can't let that be your primary focus.

The challenging experiences I have had, though, including management experience in government and private practice, were great preparation for my role at my firm, which

incorporates women into leadership roles.

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

A: Given when I started practicing, of course there have been times when I have met with resistance by virtue of being female in what used to be a predominantly male profession. The best way to handle it, for me, was to do a really good job on the work I had and establish my competence, and then others ceased to treat me differently. And then move on. You can't dwell on it, or go looking for it. I was fortunate in my earlier career to have some male mentors in prominent positions who gave me great opportunities to prove my abilities.

Starting in criminal law made it even more difficult as a young woman — it was a pretty rough world, and I had to go into Texas prisons and deal with prison officials, who looked at me and thought, "What is she doing here?" But I made it clear to them that I was there to do a job, and did not flinch from some of the less rarefied aspects of that world. I was present at a shooting in a federal courtroom, when a witness I was cross-examining came down off the witness stand swinging a knife. The federal marshal shot him. Medical personnel carried the bleeding man out of the courtroom, and we resumed the hearing. I got some "street cred" for that one.

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

A: Know your stuff. Speak up with confidence. Be a team player. Find a niche and be the best at it. Be easy to work with. And pay attention to sports, so that your eyes don't glaze over when you are at lunch with male colleagues or clients.

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

A: No surprise here — to retain younger female lawyers who will stay to become partners, I believe that firms have to be willing to accommodate the women who want to work fewer hours for a period of years so that they can spend time with their children. That is really important to value and respect. Pressures from billable-hour requirements and client demands for availability 24 hours a day make this hard for women (and men) who want this flexibility. But there is no denying the fact that face-time at the office is critical to success in the firm. Projects arise, relationships are formed, and if women are not there, they miss out on these important opportunities that can further their careers, even if everyone assigning work have the best of intentions.

We have to be realistic — law is a competitive field; good opportunities can get grabbed up by others if women are not there to take them. There are no easy answers here. But this is an area where forming teams can help; if you have a group of lawyers who are generally knowledgeable about the client's matters, then when one team member is less available, others can step in and help. It is essential that everyone buy into the team, however. I am a part of a terrific team, including male lawyers whom I admire and respect and who I know also admire and respect me, and we have been together for decades.

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

A: Jane Bockus is a senior partner and trial lawyer at [Cox Smith](#) in San Antonio. She is the first woman I ever saw try a jury trial. I had been to trial before, but had never seen a woman examine and cross-examine witnesses, and argue to the jury. She is completely herself in trial. Jane has developed her own style; she is engaging, friendly and disarming — so disarming that adverse witnesses let their guard down, and then in her very easygoing and charming way, Jane scores major points. Juries like her, and they can tell that she is genuine. Jane is an example of a female trial lawyer finding her own style and not trying to emulate others. She is fun to watch.

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