

Superwomen JDs

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About Me

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Wednesday, March 17, 2010

Superwomen Mentor Series: Featuring Erika Pedersen of Chicago

Bio: Erika Pedersen has extensive litigation experience in a full range of employment discrimination matters, including Title VII, the Equal Pay Act, Section 1981, the ADA, the ADEA, the FMLA, and various state laws and local ordinances. Her practice includes representing clients in all aspects of litigation, including state and federal administrative proceedings, trial, pre- and post-trial procedures, and appeals. She also has extensive experience representing clients in alternative dispute resolution procedures, including mediation and arbitration.

Ms. Pedersen has represented employees across the country in individual and group litigation, as well as in class action lawsuits. While much of her work has focused on representing employees in the securities industry, Ms. Pedersen has represented clients in a wide range of industries. She has also litigated against local governments, including the City of Chicago.

Prior to establishing her own firm, Ms. Pedersen was a partner at Stowell & Friedman, Ltd. in Chicago.

1. How has being a woman affected your career or legal education?

I really don't think it's had much effect one way or another, although my experience may be a little unusual. When I started at DePaul University College of Law, I was actually in the first class to have more female students than male students. Also, my first job as an attorney was working with two female partners and now I have a law firm with another female attorney. In hindsight, maybe being a woman has actually enhanced my career and made me feel more empowered because I've often been in the presence of other strong female lawyers.

2. Being a first year attorney anywhere is tough. How do you think young attorneys can really hone their skills in their first few years?

Do whatever you can in the firm you're at, but also look outside your firm for other learning opportunities. For example, join an organization affiliated with your area of practice. My area is employment discrimination and I belong to the National Employment Lawyers Association, as well as the Illinois chapter of that organization. You can learn tremendous amounts of substantive information and also develop a circle of friends who have the same professional interests as you.

3. Our profession is male dominated. How can young women balance being feminine and professional at the same time? I meet many women that simply act like one of the boys; I do not think that is the solution. Do you have any advice for handling social situations, outings with clients, etc.?

It sounds like a cliché but just be yourself. Most clients and colleagues are simply interested in your abilities as an attorney, anyway, and everything else really doesn't matter. As long as you have confidence in yourself and your abilities, you should be fine.

4. There is a perception that senior female attorneys think that they had it tough and so should you. Do you think that this sentiment is true? If so, do you think there is value in figuring things out on your own like women before you had to?

I don't think this sentiment is true. Most female lawyers I know are happy to help colleagues, particularly those that are just starting out or are looking to expand their practices.

5. What advice do you have for young female attorneys looking for a mentor? Do you feel that there is added value in finding a female mentor? What should they be looking for in a mentor, and what can they do to make themselves someone you would want to mentor?

I really don't know that I would place a lot of emphasis on finding one particular mentor. I think it's more

important to establish a few good relationships with people – male or female, peers or superiors – who can both help you with the day to day issues you will encounter in your work and who can provide overall guidance on career development. As you progress in your career, be receptive to others when they ask for help, too.

6. We all have to make sacrifices for our careers, what sacrifices have you made and which would you make again?

I've made the typical sacrifices, such as working long hours, traveling extensively, or giving up weekends and other personal time. That's unavoidable in our profession. I would do it again because if you want success, you have to earn it, it isn't going to be handed to you. Fortunately, I think my sacrifices have always been worth it.

7. What is your favorite thing about being a lawyer? I am sure you have a moment of achievement that made the sacrifices seem worth it. Can you tell us about a highlight in your career?

My favorite part about being a lawyer is helping our clients navigate what are often very difficult and upsetting situations. My area of practice is employment discrimination and I also like to think that with every case we take, we are getting that much closer to eradicating discrimination forever. I've had many highlights in my career, such as winning trials or motions, but time and again the most satisfying part is to bring a case to closure that makes a client happy and allows him or her to be excited about the next part of their lives.

8. Men still get paid more and get promoted faster. What advice do you have for young women to help them accelerate their careers?

Do excellent work and try to make yourself invaluable. If you encounter obstacles anyway, and you can honestly say there's nothing you can do to improve, perhaps it is time to start looking elsewhere. Life is too short to give 110% and not be appreciated.

9. What are your interests/hobbies outside of the legal practice? How important do you think those interests/hobbies have been in maintaining some work life balance?

It is very important to have outside interests to maintain balance in your life and enthusiasm for your work. For me, I enjoy running to deal with the stress of my job and spending time with my family, friends and baby son to remind me of what is really important.

10. What is one change you would like to see in the legal profession in the next 20 years?

I would like to see more women on the Supreme Court.

Posted by Noha Sidhom at 3:45 PM 