

Minority Powerbrokers Q&A: Goldberg Segalla's Joseph Hanna

Law360, New York (February 20, 2015, 8:12 AM ET) -- Joseph M. Hanna is a partner at Goldberg Segalla LLP, where he leads the firm's diversity task force and chairs its sports and entertainment practice group. He concentrates his practice in commercial litigation with a focus on sports and entertainment law, construction litigation and intellectual property law.

Hanna's efforts to promote diversity in the legal profession have been honored by the Minority Corporate Counsel Association, the New York State Bar Association, and other organizations. Among other positions, he is chairman of the American Bar Association's Minority Trial Lawyer Committee and a Fellow of the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity. He is a frequent writer and speaker on diversity issues.



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Hanna is also the founder of Bunkers in Baghdad, a nonprofit that has collected and shipped over 5.5 million golf balls and more than 300,000 clubs to U.S. soldiers and Wounded Warriors across the world, to aid in recreation and rehabilitation from injuries.

Law360 named Hanna a 2014 Rising Star in Media and Entertainment, highlighting his work representing giants in the media and entertainment world and authoring a comprehensive examination of the legal issues in the National Football League concussion litigation controversy.

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

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

A: I feel a bit lucky in that my entire legal career has been at a firm that is exceptionally supportive of diversity. I initially interviewed at Goldberg Segalla as a third-year law student, when the firm was still in its early years. In my interview with our managing partner, Rick Cohen, I told him I was very interested in establishing and growing a diversity task force at whichever firm I joined. Rick said that a commitment to diversity was an important component of the firm's mission, and we discussed some of the ways we both envisioned how that could play out on a practical level.

After I joined the firm, I set out on a crusade to explore issues facing diverse attorneys, not only in western New York, but throughout New York state and nationally. A great deal of

research has been done on these issues, so I devoured as much of it as I could and worked to spark conversation about it through articles and presentations across the country. At our firm, we created a formal diversity task force and established partnerships with a number of minority bar associations and other groups. I also worked toward getting involved at higher and higher levels in local groups as well as organizations like DRI and the ABA, again with much support from my firm and my mentors there. All this made it possible to design and implement diversity pipeline programs, create national networking events and facilitate clerkship programs for diverse law students around the country.

There is always room for improvement and always work to be done, but my hope was to leverage the support I had at my firm into a campaign that would help change the culture in the legal and business communities — to make it easier for others to break through those barriers that still exist in many places.

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

A: One of the greatest challenges is the significant responsibility bestowed on us to be leaders for the next generation of diverse lawyers. All the effort and perseverance that it took for us to earn these opportunities for ourselves will mean nothing if we do not live up to that responsibility. We need to pave the way for others, so that several years from now, we're not still sitting here talking about diverse lawyers in senior positions like it's a rare thing. It takes a great deal of time, focus and energy, things that are not easy to spare for any leader at a law firm. But it is worth the effort and worth making the time.

There are a number of things senior lawyers can do to build a more diverse leadership core for the future. We need to go back to the law schools and colleges, and even back to high schools, to teach young men and women about the benefits and rewards of being a lawyer. We must mentor law students and prepare them for the demands of the legal profession. Then, with the young associates at our firms, we need to invest the time to help them become skilled, confident and business-generating lawyers who will in turn become our future leaders.

It's a big responsibility to live up to, but we need to think of it as an investment that will bring a much greater return.

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

A: Early in my career, I attended a national event where my heritage was the subject of someone's idea of a joke. In that moment, it was a tremendous wake-up call. I realized that the problem is one of perception — that people often have a very cliché misunderstanding of people from different backgrounds.

I handled it by dealing with it head-on. I let the person know that kind of humor wasn't funny and that type of ignorance of other people's backgrounds and cultures sets us all back.

One of my goals in teaching and speaking about diversity issues has always been to showcase what a great country America is, emphasizing that its greatness was built on the efforts of the immigrants who came here seeking the American dream.

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

A: Mentors have played such a significant role in my career development that I would advise any young lawyer to pursue a mentor-mentee relationship. It's a relationship that can't be forced; there must be a level of comfort and trust.

Establishing a relationship with a senior attorney will provide the opportunity to learn from that attorney's past experiences — to understand the pitfalls they encountered and how they handled the challenges they faced. It presents an opportunity to learn and grow both professionally and personally.

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

A: To increase diversity in their partner ranks, firms need to make a concerted effort to nurture and groom their young men and women associates into becoming future leaders of the firm. Well-rounded attorneys with books of business are the type of men and women you want as your partners.

Again, investing time in mentoring and creating opportunities for associates is critical. They cannot be treated solely as research workhorses. They need to be given real opportunities, such as to try cases or to sit second chair. But they also must gain the business experience and savvy they will need to thrive in this profession. They need to learn firsthand how being a successful lawyer is as much about relationships as it is about legal practice. Whenever possible, they should be invited along on business development trips so they can meet potential clients and learn what it takes to create business. All of these experiences will help them become successful attorneys for whom there can be no question as to whether they should be made partner.

Implementing a diversity committee or other type of initiative at your firm can help strengthen a culture that gives diverse associates these types of opportunities, and that will certainly lead to a more diverse partnership down the road.

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