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Shook Hardy's Conn. Lead Partner On Tackling Diversity

By Clarice Silber

Law360 (May 20, 2022, 4:16 PM EDT) -- Shook Hardy & Bacon LLP brought on trial attorney Robert Simpson earlier this month to serve as managing partner of its new office in Hartford, Connecticut.

Simpson, who previously spent nearly 16 years as a partner with Shipman & Goodwin LLP, has wide-ranging experience tackling high-stakes litigation in the pharmaceutical, medical device, automotive and consumer product industries.

He said he was initially drawn to litigation work from his passion for debate and participation in a national debate team in college.

"I had the pleasure of being mentored by Jim McElhaney ... He wrote the book the 'Trial Notebook.' He was a world-renowned trial advocate, trial lawyer, and he happened to be my professor," Simpson said. "And so from there, from national debate team, to national mock trial team, litigation just was a natural flow for me."

In a recent interview with Law360 Pulse, Simpson talked about some of the biggest lessons he has learned in his career, the challenges experienced by attorneys of color, and the best way to develop and retain diverse lawyers. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What were some of the biggest lessons you learned during your tenure with Shipman & Goodwin?

During my time at Shipman, I believe I really learned the importance of the business of law. That was a major lesson. My passion has been and still is trial law, but there's so much more to being a lawyer in a large law firm than just being a skilled lawyer. Just really understanding aspects of client development, also time management, and just the key pieces of being a leader of a practice group. So I think one of the biggest lessons learned was really how to thrive when it comes to the business of law.

The other thing that I would say was a major lesson learned was the value of diversity within the structure of a law firm. It's a very different animal. We could talk about diversity in general, but in a law firm, understanding the challenges that one goes through, and the fact that it's really critical to make sure that as a leader, I build community for diverse lawyers that extends beyond just the firm.

And so for me, it was important to ensure that lawyers of color, in particular Black and Latino lawyers, were involved in state and national organizations because, as one individual, I am really limited in what I can do to provide what I think is the necessary outreach and mentoring for all the lawyers that are in the

firm. And as the senior lawyer of color, as a manager, as the leader of the firm, I know that I want to have an impact. I want to be able to cultivate and develop the lawyers of color who come behind me. Part of that is making sure I provide them the network of a community so that they are able to thrive. Those are some of the lessons learned while I was at Shipman for sure.

What are challenges you experienced coming up in the industry as an attorney of color?

There are many challenges. I think there really is not an appreciation for the demands that are placed on lawyers of color. It's really important for lawyers of color to be involved in not only the American Bar Association or the Connecticut Bar Association, which are the predominantly white bar associations, but also to be involved in the Black or Latino bar associations of a national and local level. And really, I think in order to build a community, it's necessary to understand the community. Lawyers of color have to be in both worlds, I believe, to advance. And I think that's a pressure, that's a burden, that other lawyers just don't have to face.

Then of course ... you know sometimes you feel as a lawyer of color, that the generation behind you, lawyers of color, everything is riding on your shoulders to succeed. If you fail, you fail for all lawyers of color that come behind you. And that is something that is just an added burden, but I just turn that really into a blessing. I think that by being out in front, by being a leader, that now I can use that platform to really encourage not only other lawyers of color, but high schoolers and college folks, just to see it's possible. It's possible to break barriers. I've been the first black partner at two major law firms, and in leadership and management, and I believe that I love to use that platform just to say anything is possible. So although there are burdens and there are challenges, there are blessings that come with the particular platform.

What do you find to be the best way to develop and retain young diverse attorneys?

It's the same way that you develop and you retain clients — relationships. You need to put the time in to develop relationships. And that goes to the point about being active and involved in the affinity bar associations, not just by dropping a check so that you're a sponsor, because that is really of minimal value, but taking time out to get to know the lawyers that are in the community. So when you're looking to hire, you know where to go, who to go to.

One of the superstar associates that will be joining me — Sheldon Poole — when I was looking for an associate I went out to the Crawford Bar Association and I reached out to a colleague of mine and said, "Hey, I'm looking for top talent ..." and he identified Sheldon as one of those connections. And even though I didn't have a personal relationship with Sheldon, I had relationships with individuals in the bar association so that I could tap into their resources, their connections with people that I could use to recruit.

So I think it's relationships with individuals, relationships with schools, that will be able to bear fruit with tremendous talented lawyers of color. I think that really is the key, and people don't really want to put the time and energy into it, but they do it when it comes to client relationships. And if they are sincere, with respect to developing a diverse bench, they need to put in the same time and energy into building relationships with lawyers of color.

What book or podcast is on your nightstand right now?

"The Power of Full Engagement" by James Loehr.

The essence of "The Power of Full Engagement" is if you're going to want to be at your very best, it's a matter of your body, making sure that you stay healthy, your mind, making sure that it is fully engaged, and for me, it's spiritual. The other book on my nightstand is the good book, the Bible, that daily motivation, daily devotion.

[Loehr's book] goes through a lot of executives and examples that this business coach worked with and there are different vignettes on how leaders were going through certain challenges and what they did to overcome. And I think that for me success is, you just never arrive. It's a journey, it's a never-ending journey. And that book is a constant reminder to me that in order to be at my very best, it's every aspect of my life that has to be clicking on all cylinders.

--Editing by Jill Coffey.

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