

New DC Women's Bar Leader Stresses Importance Of Mentors

By **Alison Knezevich**

Law360 (June 9, 2023, 4:30 PM EDT) -- As an intellectual property litigator, Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP associate Kandis Gibson says mentors have been key to helping her navigate "a male-dominated niche within a male-dominated field."

This month, Gibson began her term as president of the Women's Bar Association of the District Columbia, an organization that traces its roots back to 1917.

At Morgan Lewis, Gibson focuses on Section 337 proceedings — an area of the law involving unfair trade practices such as IP infringement and trade secret misappropriation — at the U.S. International Trade Commission. Outside the office, she is a triathlete, which she says helps to counteract all the sitting associated with practicing law.



Kandis Gibson

Law360 Pulse spoke with Gibson this week about mentorship, the bar association's advocacy work and how she first got interested in IP law.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Why was it important to you to take on this role as president of the Women's Bar Association of D.C.?

The WBA is near and dear to my heart. I've been a member, I'm pretty sure, since my very first year of practice. The advocacy of the association is phenomenal, and its reputation is second to none.

Since 2020, [former President] Sadina Montani's bar year, we've really looked at our advocacy and the positions that we've taken and the history of the association. One of the first official acts of the WBA after its founding was to march for women's right to vote. Since 2020, we've tried to tap back into that history of advocacy. We created an advocacy committee. For years, we've had an amicus committee that signed on to amicus briefs, and we wanted to really extend our reach there. So we started working with firms and organizations to draft our own amicus briefs. We're really trying to make sure that women have a voice on the issues that impact them both within and outside the law.

When you're looking at an organization that has that kind of history, and you've been a part of it for over a decade, it's like, "Oh my goodness, this is nerve-wracking," and, "Can I do it?" But I really want to be a part of its history and see what I can do to help the organization move to the next level.

And what are some of the issues the advocacy committee has taken on since 2020?

Following the George Floyd murder, we released an issue statement. That was kind of on the cusp of the founding of our advocacy committee.

But recently, our 2021-2022 president, Bridget Bailey Lipscomb, really set the framework for our advocacy committee. We've spoken out quite a bit on the Dobbs decision. We have done a lot of work with the Free the Pill Coalition [a group working to ensure access to birth control.]

We signed on to a resolution about Congress's meddling in the district's local affairs. We signed on to a letter regarding judicial appointments in D.C. as there's been a backlog in judicial appointments.

What are some of the top concerns of women attorneys in D.C.?

We have a really diverse membership. There are the broader work-life balance and equal pay issues, and navigating your legal career while balancing professional and family responsibilities.

There is a career development aspect of: How do we move forward in our career? How do we network? How can we be good stewards of our career?

And then there is navigating the politics of the practice of law. How do you become a partner at a law firm? How do you become a managing partner? How do you change careers? How do you deal with realizing that maybe you don't like what you're doing? These are just the realities of practicing law in 2023. We're thinking about what we're doing and how we do it more, and asking those tough questions like, "Is this what I want to do? Is this the best use of my time, and if it's not, how do I pivot to something else in a way that makes sense for me and my family?" We have a lot of those conversations.

Our theme last year was, among other things, on well-being: coming back to the office after the pandemic, and navigating this hybrid work environment and navigating a hybrid environment with children. As we've come out of the pandemic, those are a lot of the concerns facing women.

Then there are concerns that are always there. "Am I getting paid enough? Am I getting promotional opportunities? Am I moving forward in my career at the pace that I should?" Those are the things that just seem to never go away.

What role have mentors played for you in your career?

I have been incredibly fortunate to have some really phenomenal mentors. I am a member of the WBA because my very first legal mentor out of law school, Yvonne Williams, who's now a D.C. Superior Court judge [encouraged me to join].

The managing partner of my former firm [the boutique Foster Murphy Altman & Nickel PC], Barbara Murphy, who is a titan in the ITC world — I spent the developing years of my career under her [and she helped me become] confident in the law and understand how to navigate a male-dominated niche within a male-dominated field ... Sometimes you need people who don't make it painful when you make a mistake.

I wouldn't be at Morgan Lewis without the people that have worked with me throughout my career. At Morgan Lewis, the managing partner of our San Francisco office, Brent Hawkins, has been an incredible

mentor to me in the lead-up to getting to Morgan Lewis and since I've gotten here. When you're navigating going from a seven-attorney law firm to a 2,000-attorney law firm, it takes a little bit of finesse. And so he's been wonderful.

Stephanie Roberts, who's in our DC office. I can pick up the phone and I can vent and I can rant, and she'll listen to me and say, "Hey, I think you should talk to this person," or, "Have you considered this?"

I think you need those sounding boards if you want to be successful ... The law can be tough. I think you have to have people around you who are supporting you and who can help you navigate the ups and downs.

I do ITC litigation. That's been my primary focus for years. And I've been to court and there are 30 attorneys and maybe two women. Or you're excited because you see like six women, and then you realize you're the only attorney. Everyone else is the judge's staff.

Again, I think that's why it's so important to have those mentors who know what it's like. Stephanie Roberts and I were friends even before I came to Morgan Lewis. There have been times when we are the only two women in the courtroom. There's that commonality that makes getting through the difficulty of the task a little bit easier because if nothing else, you know that there's someone there who understands what you're going through.

How did IP law become your career path?

I tripped and fell into IP ... I was working at my first law firm out of law school and I was doing Foreign Corrupt Practices Act work. FCPA work at the time was really amazing travel. I was in Dubai, Egypt, Kuwait and all over the world. But I didn't like the work ... We were doing compliance investigations, and it was just not what I thought my legal practice would look like. I wanted to be a litigator. And so I went to one of my mentors and I said, "Hey, this work is fine, but I really want to be in court. I want to be a litigator."

He said, "Go talk to Barbara Murphy. She's in the Section 337 practice group, and they're always in court. So see what she says." She said, "OK, great. Come to our practice group meetings." I started going to their practice group meetings. And then they left the firm and started their own firm. ... I ended up leaving for their new firm.

You also do triathlons. How do you make time for that with your career?

It's so hard. This morning, I had to swim ... I had to will myself to the pool.

You squeeze it when you can. You figure out how to wake up early, try to figure out how to be flexible. I'm a firm believer that you have to be kind to yourself because there are days where it's not happening.

When I was in law school, one of the deans at Howard said to me that you need to find a way to do something for yourself every day.



Kandis Gibson is pictured in September 2022 at the eight-mile Swim for Alligator Lighthouse in Islamorada, Florida. (Courtesy Photo)

My grandfather had ALS and he died a few years ago ... My grandma said to me, "Listen, if I had life to live all over again, there are so many things that wouldn't be important. I think about the amount of time that I spent cleaning my house and how important it was for me to have this pristine house." All of these things that just in the end weren't important. And she said, "We worked hard so that we could have this time when we retired to travel and to enjoy one another. And then we retired and he got sick."

And so every time I talk to her now, this is part of the conversation. What are you doing that makes you happy?

So it's important to me to go through my life and to try to find a way to squeeze in something for me every day, be it walking the dog or running or biking or swimming or have a phone call with a friend.

--Editing by Jill Coffey.