

PUBLICATION

City Spotlight: Association of Corporate Counsel's Georgia Chapter

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In February of this year, I had a day like any other day that we all know well. Up at 5:30 to run, back to the house to dress and pack for a business trip, make breakfast and get my junior high school daughter off to school. A busy morning at Baker Donelson, then off to the airport. I arrived in Houston that afternoon, looking every bit as tired as I felt. I had to be at Baker Donelson's Houston office in an hour for their open house, then off to take several clients out for a late dinner. But luckily, I had made it through the day without dropping any plates, as my friend Christy Crider likes to say.

As soon as I arrived in my hotel room, my phone rang. It was my friend Elizabeth Robertson of Crawford and Company. Elizabeth is the chief of litigation for Crawford and an officer of the Association of Corporate Counsel's (ACC) Georgia Chapter. Elizabeth explained that the ACC Georgia Chapter was launching a women's initiative, a project near and dear to the heart of the new chapter president, Wanda Morris of Home Depot. Would Baker Donelson be interested in being a founding sponsor of the initiative? I did not hesitate – of course we would! What an honor and an incredible opportunity – to be on the ground floor of developing a women's initiative. I was excited to meet some great women and get to know others better.

My experience with women's initiatives has been limited to the great program we have at Baker Donelson. I quickly learned that the challenges and issues for a women's initiative in an organization like ACC are in some ways very similar, but in some very important ways, the context is different. Two key differences are dealing with "The Department of No" mentality in corporations and the wide-ranging differences in the work environments of its members.

The Department of No. We all know that legal departments are often viewed by their internal clients as the "Department of No." Corporate executives often do not like dealing with the constraints imposed by their legal departments. Unlike outside lawyers, who are usually sought out by companies who welcome their input (or at least acknowledge that it is necessary), company executives are required to get the legal department's "blessing" on a deal, company initiative or program. Or have to go to them, hat in hand, when something goes awry. An in-house lawyer's trajectory up the corporate ladder requires that he or she gain the confidence of the executives, and find a way to protect the company's legal interests without appearing to be a naysayer.

Since joining the steering committee of the ACC Georgia Chapter's Women's Initiative, I have thought a lot about how it must be especially challenging for women in those departments. Over the last several years, many legal departments have undergone what I like to call a gender transformation. When I began practicing more than 25 years ago, a woman general counsel was unheard of – and women in legal departments were a rarity. Today, there are 110 women general counsels in the Fortune 500. Through my own experience, I have observed that increasingly the in-house lawyers I know or work with are women. However, most of the "c-suites" in those companies continue to be dominated by men. So one of the unique challenges women in-house attorneys face is working against the "Department of No" perception and garnering the support and confidence of male executives who may not be entirely comfortable with being told "no" by a female lawyer. It is the classic situation many of us face every day – being firm and committed to what you know is in the best interest of your client (the company), while deftly managing negative gender stereotypes and convincing male colleagues in the c-suite that you are all on the same team. The good news is that there is strength in

numbers. And the more the "gender transformation" evolves, the more support women in-house lawyers will have from each other.

So Many Companies, So Many Workplaces. My frame of reference is one workplace in one industry. A law firm in the legal business. When it comes to the workplace issues we confront at Baker Donelson, there is a commonality of experience, because we all work for the same organization. The membership of the Georgia Chapter of the ACC (which is predominantly Atlanta in-house lawyers) is made up of lawyers from a wide variety of legal departments – from enormous, global in-house departments, to start-ups where the in-house lawyer is basically a "solo." Also, there is no one industry that dominates the Atlanta business community, so there are members from every industry and business sector – manufacturing, retail, logistics, IT, finance, consumer products, agriculture, oil and gas, transportation, insurance, education, health care, communications – the list is endless. As Wanda Morris, ACC Georgia Chapter President, has described it: "ACC Georgia is fortunate to have an array of female members who bring different legal specialties, in-house roles and professional tenure to our chapter. The challenge for us through our Women's Initiative has been how to address the needs of our female members across such a varied landscape."

The first three programs offered by the ACC were: 1) an open forum/discussion of small groups of women, facilitated by the members of the steering committee; 2) a panel discussion on what it takes to become a general counsel; and 3) a mentoring workshop followed by a luncheon and spa treatments at a luxury hotel. The open forum event was designed to learn from the membership what issues they wanted the ACC Women's Initiative to address. Very quickly, it became clear that how to advance up the corporate ladder to general counsel and mentoring were critical to the membership. Not much different than for those working at a law firm – how to make partner and how to find a good mentor. Which explains why we chose the topics for the two subsequent programs!

The panelists for the discussion with general counsels were from different industries and ran the gamut from the general counsel of a large global company in the insurance sector, to a woman who is essentially her own legal department in the oil and gas industry. I had the honor of acting as the moderator of the panel. It was a fun, lively and informative discussion and extremely well received by the attendees. The mentoring workshop was excellent. This is where I believe the variety of workplaces and business sectors is truly an asset to the membership, because it was less focused on specific career strategies and help, but on what to look for in a person as a mentor or sponsor.

The experience of working with a women's initiative in an entirely different setting than what I have experienced thus far in my career has been quite a learning experience. I feel that I am more in tune with the day-to-day issues my women clients contend with, and it has given me a new perspective on our own women's initiative at Baker Donelson. It has made me very proud of the work we do as a law firm to support our women. But I am especially proud of how well we support each other – something I have become keenly aware of as I learn more about the day-to-day experiences of women in a wide variety of corporate legal departments.

In November, we will wrap up the year with an overnight retreat to plan for next year, and a cocktail and dinner reception for the sponsors of the ACC Women's Initiative.