

Black Women Litigators In Their Own Words

SHEILA S. BOSTON

The author is a partner at Arnold & Porter Kaye Scholer LLP in New York City.

LITIGATION assembled a panel of Black women litigators to talk about the particular challenges they face and put moderator duties into the capable hands of Sheila Boston, president of the New York City Bar Association, the first woman of color to hold the position in its 150-year history.

The Zoom discussion ran for about twice as long as would fit in our pages. The video recording of the first 25 minutes can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/55ezN23JvZM>. What you will see there is Sheila's introduction of herself and the other five amazing Black women litigators on the panel. Sheila was perfect for this role, as she confessed that as a girl she was "madly in admiration" of Barbara Walters. Sheila elicits from each panelist "fun facts" about their childhood career aspirations, the paths each of them took to their current jobs, and the strategies each used along the way.

The panel spanned an amazing diversity of age, geography, litigation practice, and setting.

Lonita Baker recently moved in-house for Waystar, a health care technology company in Louisville, Kentucky. During a stint at Sam Aguiar Injury Lawyers, a plaintiffs' personal injury firm, she represented the family of Breonna Taylor in obtaining a favorable wrongful death settlement. Starting out, Lonita spent four years representing criminal defendants, half of the time as a public defender, and then worked six years as a prosecutor. "For most of the life of a case, it's the prosecutor who's holding the reins and has the power to really impact how justice is administered. Prosecutors

have a lot of power, and I loved doing that job because I felt that I made a difference."

Eileen Letts is a partner in the Chicago office of Zuber Lawler LLP and has tried dozens of cases to a jury and more than 100 to the bench. Eileen learned from a judicial clerkship that she didn't much like writing and found success using her voice trying cases for the Chicago Housing Authority. She's still trying cases, including current representation of Chicago police officers in misconduct cases. Sheila asked Eileen whether her strategies as a Black woman litigator differed from the strategies of the general legal community. "I believe that when people see me, they see a Black woman and they treat me differently, maybe consciously or maybe subconsciously. So my strategy has always been: Be the best I can be. Do the best job I can do. Be friendly, nice, and professional to everybody, and get respect. There are times that, as Black women, we don't get that respect, and this experience is key to how we understand our own strategies. How do we handle that disrespect? How do we react and respond, whether it's microaggressions or something less subtle? That, to me, is when our strategies come into play."

Lorraine McGowen is a former leader of the Restructuring Group at Orrick Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP in New York, serves on the global firm's management committee, and is the partner in charge for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. "As a young litigator, you have to develop your voice and your style that you are comfortable with. You cannot mimic other people's style or way of

litigating. I am a New York bankruptcy attorney, which are known to be people that pound the table, scream, shout, and use curse words. But I am a short Black woman—I would be a caricature if I were to do that, right? So as a Black woman, I do things differently, and did so particularly early on in my career.”

Jamila S. Mensah is an employment and labor partner in Norton Rose Fulbright’s Houston office. After spending time as a college recruiter searching out top talent in places like Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama, Jamila thought she needed to do more and applied to law school. “I didn’t have any lawyers in my family, nor did I know anybody who was a lawyer, so I didn’t have a clear path outlined when I entered law school. But I worked hard and got a job at a midsize regional firm that did a little bit of everything, and in that process, I had my first employment case. I knew I wanted to be a litigator, but I also knew that I’m too much of an empathizer to have really survived in something like criminal law or family law. But employment began to make sense—it was something I could manage emotionally and still be in a position to make an impact for my clients.”

Vickie Turner is a partner at Wilson Turner Kosmo LLP in San Diego and a nationally recognized product liability defense attorney. Her advice to younger litigators: “Get comfortable not knowing. I remember getting assignments and thinking that I had no idea how to approach the project. But I was comfortable enough to ask questions and then do my own research so that I could educate myself. Sometimes I would have to stretch my knowledge and be proactive, but I wanted to be the person that partners felt they could go to for the right answer. I was often a little bit out of my comfort zone, but that’s how I grew and moved ahead.”

Back to Sheila for the remainder of the Black women litigators’ discussion, edited for space and clarity.

SB: All right, ladies, let’s start talking about giving some advice for being a successful litigator. Eileen, what are the factors that you think are most important for Black females who are seeking to become successful litigators?

EL: Knowledge. Know your case. But more importantly, know your opponent’s case, backwards, forwards, sideways, and upside down. You need to know what’s going to hurt you, what’s going to help you, and how to put yourself in the position to best represent your client. Coupled with that is honesty. To be a really good litigator, you have to know how to be honest with your clients. And if you got a really bad case, you’ve got to be able to tell them that and encourage an early resolution.

SB: “Know when to hold ’em. Know when to fold ’em. Know when to walk away. And know when to run.”

EL: Exactly. That is a great segue into another point. To be a great litigator, you need to have a poker face. I once was on trial and my witness testified terribly, but I sat there with a face that suggested I fully expected it. It’s absolutely vital for litigators to keep it together, no matter what the circumstance. Great litigators

also need to, in a sense, bluff. Being a great litigator requires knowing how to “work your facts,” so to speak, so that you are the best advocate possible. Great litigators also must listen. Listen to your clients, your opponents, your judge.

Self-Presentation

SB: Now, because this is real talk, I’ve got to throw out another question as well: Because you are a Black woman, did your strategies differ in any way from the strategies of the general legal community?

LM: I am purposeful about how I dress. I dress for the moment and know my audience. When I was younger, there were many judges I would never have appeared in court in a pants suit.

SB: Thank you for saying that, Lorraine, because I know this is a loaded subject. We all want to be our authentic selves, but, especially as Black women, we are always conscious of perception. Take casual Friday, for example. I know the younger generation of lawyers like casual Friday, but as a Black woman, I have never really adopted it into my practice and mostly because I don’t want to be mistaken for someone who is a “whatever,” right? This matters because—let’s just keep it real—unconscious biases sometimes cause people to think that I am the court reporter or anyone but the lead lawyer on the case. Have mercy!

LB: I realized early on, that I was often sought after because I was a Black woman. This meant that I was able to truly bring my authentic self. I think often of CK Hoffer, one of the greatest plaintiffs’ trial attorneys in the United States. I remember I attended a litigation boot camp where CK spoke about dressing as a Black woman in trial, and even presenting to a jury as a Black woman, and how we have to do that. Although I can’t emulate her style—I wish I could—those things resonated with me. I have my own style as a Black woman, and my genuineness is what plays to the jury and is part of my effectiveness as a litigator.

SB: Vickie, what are the biggest challenges to being a litigator?

VT: This may sound strange, but to me, one of the largest challenges is making the case—in other words, how do I simplify the facts enough so that everyone can understand my point of view and then accept that point of view? For example, my product liability cases involve working with engineers to understand complex design topics. If I want to win at trial, I have to take those topics down to the most common denominator so that everyone on the jury can understand our position.

SB: OK, we are going to get real now. Can you share an experience that, while discouraging, you learned from it? And I recognize that I am asking you to be vulnerable.

JM: I’m so glad you asked that question. It’s so important for more senior lawyers to speak to younger lawyers about our mistakes or about when something has not gone the way we wanted it to. Managing such situations is what separates out the very

successful lawyers. And I preach this often around my firm because our partners, especially the really successful ones, do not do this enough.

So I will practice what I preach and tell you about one of my mistakes. Honestly, even thinking about it now, I get a bit sick to my stomach. My client had been sued for breach of contract by a former employee who had been fired and who therefore was not receiving severance. One contentious issue between the parties involved communications that we had withheld as privileged. The general counsel of my client also served a lot of business functions, and there were gray lines between which of his communications were privileged and which were likely not but which we had withheld anyway because the client asked me to take a very aggressive view on privilege. So, on the eve of trial, we had a hearing where opposing counsel argued to the judge that we had inappropriately withheld documents under the guise of privilege and asked the court to sanction me.

I remember leaving the hearing thinking that I was going to get fired and would need to start my career over. And then I made the best decision I could have, which is I called my sponsor. Rule number one to dealing with a mistake: Tell someone right away. That's the only way forward. And she walked me through a strategy for a way forward. I was able to bounce back. I filed a response and was able to protect the documents that needed to be protected and produced the materials that weren't really privileged and probably should have been produced anyway.

SB: Lessons are learned when mistakes are made. We don't share that enough, so thank you. When mistakes are made, is it any different or more challenging for people of color, women of color in particular?

EL: Well, as a Black woman, navigating "the one and done" or "prove it again" mentality has been challenging.

SB: Can you explain a little more?

EL: Well, yes. I can probably explain this best with an example because it has happened to me. I remember this one trial. I did such a great job, I will never forget it. It was a first-time client, and the case was a very difficult one. The plaintiff was sympathetic, and my witnesses were not the greatest. But my closing was one for the books. It was absolutely fabulous. In fact, it was so convincing that the opposing side folded and settled with us while the jury was out. My client could not have had a better result. But have I seen a case from my client since? No. The client never hired me again.



By comparison, I have a lawyer friend who is a white man. I recall a trial that did not go so well, and the outcome was not favorable to his client. The client still kept going back to the lawyer. I recall the general counsel of the client basically say, "Oh well, it wasn't your fault. There were some other issues." I have never in my career had that experience. People of color, and especially Black women, have to prove themselves each and every time. Clients can often see us as "the little Black girl," and they would just rather have someone else do the work.

Bias: Unconscious and Conscious

SB: There's that adage: Black women have to work twice as hard. I would dare say that it is still true. Sad, but true. We're not always given the same second chances when we make mistakes. Let's talk a little bit about unconscious bias, or maybe it's conscious bias.

VT: Two experiences come to mind from my first firm. One from the beginning of my career there and one at the end.

I was a fairly junior lawyer at the law firm and was doing work for one particular client. I had a string of successes for them, but, as this was before Zoom and videoconference, I had actually never met the client, although I had talked on the phone with them many times. I recall that I worked on a big arbitration for the client and got a great result for them. So the client asked the partner and me to come over to celebrate with them. You could just see it on the clients' faces when I walked in. They had no idea I was African American. They were very polite, but their faces told it all. Within two days, the partner called me into his office and said, "We don't know how to raise this, but the client has asked that we remove you from all of their files." The client didn't give a specific reason, but we all knew what the reason

Illustration by Jamiel Law

was. I remember the partner asking me if I wanted him to make a bigger issue of this. I didn't. To this day, I regret not doing more to push back, even though I'm not even sure, sitting here today, what more I could have done. I do not want to work for a client who doesn't want to work with me.

Fast-forward to 16 years later, same firm. I was leaving. I announced my departure, and one of my partners said to me, "You know, Vickie, you really can't leave. You are our only African American partner." Now, it might have been in jest, but I thought, "What? I have been here 16 years. Is that all I get out of this?" It was an experience.

LM: Black women get underestimated all the time. I have worked on major bankruptcy cases where I walked into the courtroom and I'm the only Black person, let alone Black woman, and I'll have associates with me, and people will gravitate to them, assuming that they are the partner or the lead attorney on the matter.

But you know, judges can play a valuable role in working against this unconscious bias. I remember appearing in court once, and everyone in the room just assumed that this tall white male first-year associate was the lead attorney on this case and was handling this matter. I stand up at the podium, and the judge announces, "Ms. McGowan, nice to see you. Please note your appearance on the record." And then he says, "I don't know the rest of you people. Why don't you make your appearance?" That was a mic-drop moment.

SB: You know, we've got to laugh or else we'd cry. Those experiences underscore the importance of mentoring white male associates, which is something I have made a conscious effort of recently. It's important for them to hear our stories and to understand our struggles; this is how we make allies. I also want them to have a frame of mind of getting used to having a Black female as their boss or supervising attorney.

I'll never forget a very similar experience to yours, Lorraine. I was at a deposition with a tall, white second-year associate whom plaintiff's counsel addressed as being counsel for our client. And because he was my mentee, he was an ally and understood the impact of the moment, and he said, without skipping a beat, "No, actually, this is Sheila Boston. She's a partner. She's the lead counsel on this case."

I think one of the keys to understanding these issues is that it is not often a result of people not trying. I think it's more often that the desire people have to be allies goes unfulfilled. What institutional changes could be implemented to change the environment, and what, if any, changes have you seen?

LB: In general, we need more Black women in litigation. This is the best way to normalize our presence. We are here. We are badass. We are not going anywhere.

SB: There are two other systemic, institutional changes I think could make a difference. First, there must be systems in place for

complaints or concerns to be lodged. And then we have to utilize them because you can't resolve a problem unless it's been identified. Also, it could be a good recruitment tool for allies. I think one of our biggest hurdles in finding allies is that people don't actually know these types of things are happening. We need to get these stories out there.

Second, the clients need to demand the change. We are starting to see this as corporations demand diversity in their cases. This makes a huge difference.

LM: Similarly, I want to thank the judges who are asking these questions. More and more, judges are raising questions about why there is no diversity in the counsel that appear before them. I think the more attention that is brought to bear on the need for diversity, particularly people of color as trial lawyers, the more we can add to that.

LB: Sheila, I want to add to your point of there needing to be a system for complaints or concerns. The best way to ensure that such a system works is for it to be honest. I know we all like the term "unconscious bias," but I have to say, sometimes it just is not. Sometimes, it is racism or prejudice, and we need to be willing to call it that if that is what it is.

SB: Tell me, Jamila, what do you love most about being a litigator?

JM: My touchy-feely response to that is I really like being able to help my clients. In employment law, sometimes being a good lawyer comes down to just answering the phone and talking through difficult scenarios. I also make it a habit to adopt the "we" when I'm talking to my client. "We" did this. "We" should do that. I always use *we's* early because it helps orient my mind in a way that allows me to advocate for the client. This matters to clients—knowing and feeling that, again no matter the outcome, somebody was up there, fighting for them—that's my favorite part. But this also comes into play in motion practice or even in trial. Being able to stand up and do a great job—that matters to the client. We always think of the courtroom as a place to put on a show for the judge or the jury, but really you're putting on a show for your client.

SB: Vickie, what has been your greatest achievement thus far as an attorney?

VT: I think I'm especially proud of balancing being a good attorney representing my clients and also being a good community person and mother. That was a tough balance for me. I have three sons and four grandchildren, with one more on the way, and it was important to me for my children to feel that I was there. It was also important for my firm and my clients to know that I was doing the very best I could for them, and that is not an easy balance sometimes.

SB: One thing I really appreciate about the younger generation of lawyers out there is that work-life balance is a centerpiece of the conversation. I always tell them it's not real balance all the

time. Sometimes one thing is prioritized over another, but you know it's about just figuring it out, right, and making it work for you in the long run. And having your own definition of success. Lorraine, I see you nodding your head.

LM: Yeah, it's hard to follow Vickie on that, but having balance is definitely something that I'm most proud of. I'm a proud mother of four—triplets plus one—all graduates of Princeton University. Although my youngest doesn't like to be referred to as the “plus one”!

I'm very proud of them. But I may be even more proud of my marriage. I've been married for 30-plus years, and I have a rock star husband who has supported me throughout my professional life. I'm also proud of the leadership roles that I have played at my firm over the years. We are an Am Law 50 law firm with over 1,000 lawyers worldwide. There aren't many Black women who are ever asked to serve in a senior leadership position, and I was asked to take on that leadership role in 2008, and I served two terms on our firm's board. And I now serve on our firm's management committee.

SB: I remember when you were nominated for that honor, Lorraine. I am not kidding when I say I was ecstatic for you. It's funny because I am just sitting here asking myself the same question, and for me, my legacy is really my diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. I feel like God put me on this earth to help sound the gong, to trumpet the need for more diversity in this profession. I know people get tired of the way that I infuse it into everything I do, but that's my legacy.

Our successes shouldn't be a surprise though, right? Statistics tell us that Black women are the most educated demographic in America, averaging at least two academic degrees. What, if any, reaction or assessment do you make of that?

EL: That statistic as compared to the number of Black female equity partners in the law is pretty sobering. The number of Black female equity partners has been pretty flat for like the last 20 years. In addition, our pay is at the bottom tier of all women lawyers. We have to keep fighting the fight. We can't stop.

SB: I agree. One other observation about that statistic is that it doesn't surprise me because it's consistent with what I see in our community. Black parents really want a better life than their parents, and we want an even better life for our children. This results in a big emphasis on education as a means of upward mobility in this country. In my household growing up, our two main principles [were] love and family, and faith and education.

SB: Let's talk retention. Retention, especially of women of color, is a challenge with all organizations. What did your respective organizations do or not do that encouraged you to actually stay?

JM: Let me take that question from the angle of why I considered leaving my prior firm. I was a seventh- or eighth-year associate, and while all signs seemed to be leading towards partnership, nobody had actually had that conversation with me. No one ever sat

down with me and said, “Here's how to become partner, and this is how you can contribute to our partnership.” I felt very disconnected from the core of the firm where the decisions were made, and no one seemed to invite me to come in. So when another opportunity presented itself, I took it. And when I announced that I was leaving, people started coming out of the woodwork, telling me that I was super-valuable to the firm. But it had never occurred to anyone to have these conversations until it was too late.

SB: It's like that refrain from the song: “Too much, too little, too late to ever try again.”

JM: And that's so true for many people. Interestingly for me, I ended up changing my mind and staying, which was the right decision at the time. I later left to join another firm. But that story has stuck with me. At my firm, I have significant involvement on the hiring committee and the attorney evaluation committee, and I serve as the cochair on the Racial Equity Council. There's also been investment in me as a citizen of the firm. Young lawyers are not going to stay if they don't see anybody who looks like [them]. I think that organizations really underestimate how much people value seeing people who look like them or seeing people that they're connected to being treated well at the firm.

Maintaining an Attorney Pipeline

SB: Anybody else? What has kept you at your various institutions?

VT: While it may sound strange, for me, it is the feeling that I am making a difference at the firm that has made me feel at home. It's important for a firm not just to value who you are but also understand where you want to go. I wanted to do product liability work at the firm at a time when we were not doing much of that work. The firm helped me to develop the practice and meet my goals, which was important to my decision to stay.

SB: How important are bar associations, including minority bar associations? To get anything out of them requires time. Is the return on investment worth it? How important is it for us as Black women?

JM: I think it's also important for Black women to consider different definitions of “return on investment.” Our experiences are different, so our needs are different. The “return” for Black people in firms that is worth the effort can be simply having the opportunity to be around our people, to be reinvigorated, to be held up when you're falling down, and to be able to talk to people who are going through the things that you're going through. My firm supported me attending these conferences. So is it still worth it if I come back without any new clients? Yes, because what the firm has invested in is me staying at this firm one more day. Because sometimes that's what is needed. These conferences enable Black lawyers to be around people who understand the struggle and to whom they can explain it. It takes me five minutes to tell my Black co-attendees what it would take me 30 minutes

to tell somebody else about what I've been experiencing. And if Lonita or Vickie was there, they would say to me, "Look, hey. Me too. That same thing happened to me. Stay in the zone, girl." That gives me the strength and support to show up fortified at work the next day. That may be all you get, but that's worth it. These conferences help create a space for lawyers who are in environments every day with people who don't look like us, and it allows us to remember that this is our space, too. Because sometimes, on a day-to-day basis, that's hard to remember.

SB: How do we make law alluring to our young aspiring lawyers out there? And, secondly, are there particular areas of law that you try to channel people toward? Lorraine, I'm actually going to pick on you first because you're on the board of directors for Legal Outreach, which is a diversity pipeline program.

LM: Pipeline is a big focus area for me. I am particularly concerned about making sure that we're developing our middle school kids and high school students to think about a career in the law. I have found the key is emphasizing that there is so much more to being a lawyer than what you see on trial dramas on TV. Getting a law degree is about teaching you how to think and write and communicate. And there are endless possibilities of areas of expertise: criminal law, data privacy, cybersecurity, transactional work, sports and entertainment, computer science, intellectual property, cryptocurrency. And it's global. You can also pursue a business career with a law degree. There's just so much you can do with a law degree that you can't do with quite a number of other degrees.

JM: I also do a lot of pipeline work at the high school level, and I always tell students that if you look at the most powerful people in this country, most of them have law degrees, even if they never practiced. A law degree is just one of those things that opens up the highest level of a number of areas. Nine times out of 10, the critical thinking capabilities that you gain from legal education are going to make you one of the smartest people in most of the rooms that you're in. And it will equip you to do literally anything.

LB: In the last two years, most of the young people I speak to about going to law school are interested in doing so because of Breonna Taylor. I tell them straight out to become a prosecutor, because those are the lawyers who have the most impact.

SB: I say that, too. Quite frankly, you know, sometimes in our community, you hear people say to Black prosecutors, "Oh that's selling out! Why are you going to do that?" But it's where there's a lot of power. And we have got to be everywhere—in every facet of the legal profession and the criminal justice system—to make a difference.

LB: This is what young Black lawyers are passionate about right now. I also think it's a stereotypical myth that the civil rights arena is comprised of mostly Black people. When I look around Louisville, the only other attorneys doing civil rights cases are white males. So it would be a great arena for young

Black attorneys to enter, but I wouldn't want to suggest that someone should do that because there's a large community of Black attorneys in that area of law—we're not. Civil rights cases are time-consuming and expensive, and Black attorneys don't have the same resources and aren't afforded some of the same luxuries to be able to take on those cases.

EL: This has been my experience as well. I do a lot of work defending the City of Chicago and police officers, and most of the lawyers I'm up against are white, and, frankly, they have all done well financially.

LB: This is a good example of an area where big law firms can make a difference. Just as Lorraine mentioned that Orrick came in and did some work on the Breonna Taylor case reviewing grand jury materials, if other larger firms stepped up to provide resources, more Black attorneys can take on these cases. I think all Black lawyers have a sense that we've got to change the world, whether we're in the corporate arena or wherever we are. And this is an area where Black attorneys in any area of the profession can make a difference, but I don't want us to have that myth that we're out here flooding the civil rights market, because we're not.

Breonna Taylor's case was my most powerful case because of the impact of the tragedy and the reach that I had in educating communities. But it was also the hardest case that I've had because of the emotional weight and the empathy that I have as a Black woman, as I'm sure was shared by all of you. We need more people to help shoulder that because I was just like, "Whew, Lord."

Categories of Diversity

SB: I love this conversation we are having—it has spirit and is educational. Now, I know we are a group of Black females, but I would submit that diversity in larger respects is important as well. What other categories of diversity are important to our profession?

LM: I'm going to take this in a slightly different direction than you may expect, but I know mental health has been a particular focus of the bar recently. I also know this is near and dear to your heart, Sheila. Diversity surveys have shown again and again that the ability of individuals to self-identify their different abilities and utilize those different abilities in the workplace is critical to a productive workplace and good mental health.

SB: Bless you for that. Jamila?

JM: I want to give a shout-out to age diversity, and how important it is to show a real willingness to listen to people from different age groups. This is especially true in big organizations. I still think of myself as fairly young compared to some of my partners, but I'm not young when it comes to the most junior lawyers at my firm. And one thing that I have noticed as I've gotten older is that it is harder to hear what the young people

are trying to tell me about the firm or what it is they're looking for, what they want to do with their lives. And I remember that I used to get a lot of that from some of my more senior peers, and I understand that now. But times have changed, and in COVID, everything has changed. And young people are more willing to speak up and say they aren't willing to do this anymore. So it's critically important to be able to mesh the generations within the workforce and have everybody listen to everybody else, especially if your goal is to have a long-term organization. If you don't want your organization to just die out, and you don't want people to quit working for you, you have to change with the times. I think that's a real challenge a lot of organizations are facing, especially these institutionalized law firms that have been around for a million years. Law firms, I think, historically have been the slowest to change anything, ever. And I think that is something that we really need to pay attention to, if we want to continue bringing new, fresh ideas into the profession and getting people excited about joining us, and then hopefully staying and becoming partner.

It's not just age diversity, but it's also diversity in thought, culture, and how we are going to work as a profession.

LB: We're in the same generation, Jamila, and we are the generation right in the middle between the young lawyers who are pushing for positive change and the more senior lawyers who have done things the same way for so long. And there's something to take from both groups; I learned from lawyers on each end of this spectrum. When I look at the younger lawyers and consider things that they hold important, like their work-life balance, I ask myself, "Why wasn't this important to us before?" And it's not just age diversity, but it's also diversity in thought, culture, and how we are going to work as a profession. And this, of course, goes right back to mental health. I don't know about your jurisdictions, but in Kentucky, the amount of attorneys that have committed suicide is alarmingly high, and I think that is directly related to the challenges that come with just putting everything into work.

SB: In addition to age, I want to give a shout-out to my LGBTQ brothers and sisters, and to socioeconomic differences.

LB: I'm probably going to take some heat for this, but we also need to make sure there's no complacency. Meeting one diversity goal should not be sufficient. I think this comes into play when talking about gender diversity. Firms have made strides when it comes to gender equality, and they like to use the "woman benchmark" to applaud their diversity efforts. I'm not saying don't, but these efforts shouldn't be applauded to the point of sacrificing racial diversity. I want to challenge our firms to continue to keep racial diversity at the forefront.

LM: I say to these firms, "Please, disaggregate! Do not aggregate all the races together." We're not all monolithic, and if you really want to know where your gaps are and where you need to focus your energies, you do have to disaggregate.

Concluding Words

SB: I love it. I love it. I can't believe the time went by so quickly, but before we close, I want to give each of you a chance to give some last words. What do you want to leave this audience with?

LB: Just keep pushing. As Black women litigators, we know we have to be the best always, but to be the best always, we always have to be prepared. And stay on top of the law.

SB: Bless you. Eileen?

EL: I concur with that, but we've also got to bring others with us. We got to help other people, mentor young lawyers and encourage them to be the best they can be. When I'm out of the practice of law, yes, I want to be remembered as a good lawyer, but I also want to have helped people.

SB: Bless you. Jamila?

JM: You asked earlier what we are most proud of, and the answer is this: just existing and succeeding in this space. Looking the way that I look and being able to say that there are people who look like us that can be successful in this space. We exist in this space in a way that allows other people to see our hard work, how we push, and how we bring others forward. It's a privilege to be able to see that in real time every day.

SB: Bless you. Lorraine?

LM: I agree with all of that. The only thing that I would add is that I would advise people to take the long view. This is not a short career. Several of us have been practicing for more than 25 years. Enjoy the journey, and learn along the way.

SB: Bless you. Vickie, talk to us.

VT: This is our time. Make the most of it. There is so much that we can do. We have the opportunities. Let's use them and work together.

SB: Powerful. For me, I will say this: The struggle is real, but never give up. Your blood, and I'm talking to Black females especially, our blood is flowing with that of our ancestors, who were smart, strong, creative, courageous, and mega-resilient. So we've got this—we can do this! ■