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Not So Fast

An **Ivy League** background doesn't **prepare** you for everything.

BY KATHERINE FRINK-HAMLETT

I am an Asian-American associate of Chinese descent. I recently joined a premier corporate law department as a senior lateral associate. When I joined the firm, it was made clear that I would be on partnership track and while there weren't any guarantees, I would be up for consideration within my first two years at the firm. I graduated cum laude from an Ivy League university and also attended an Ivy League law school where I was on Law Review.

For the most part, my experience within my new department has been extremely encouraging and overall, positive: I've been intimately involved with several high-profile assignments working with one of the firm's rainmakers, a key corporate partner. He seems to have a great deal of respect for my work and has been extremely encouraging. We frequently pitch new business together and I am clearly considered a meaningful team player.

Recently, this partner and I were at a

Katherine Frink-Hamlett, a graduate of New York University School of Law, is president of Frink-Hamlett Legal Solutions, Inc. and can be reached at katherine@frinkhamlett.com.

meeting where one of our Asian support staff employees was serving breakfast. In my presence, he turns to the woman and requests dim sum and then asks jokingly, "Isn't that what you people eat for breakfast?" I was floored—I was so shocked I could barely speak. I contacted another Asian attorney at the firm who mentioned that this partner was known for questionable remarks, almost exclusively directed towards support staff of color, mostly female, and usually in the form of so-called jokes. How can I trust that this partner's view of Asians will not impair my chances for partnership? Should I be looking to leave? Is he racist?

It seems to me that he's a colossal retard. But, a rainmaking retard with "rainmaking" being the operative word. I suspect that he views his off-color and offensive comments as amusing. Just like the ill-mannered little boy who burps incessantly amidst the riotous laughter of his equally ill-mannered little



friends, this partner may be totally clueless that his so-called jokes are in extreme poor taste. Is he a racist? Maybe—maybe not.

However, a more likely scenario is that he has not been exposed to many Asians, whether Chinese, Korean, Japanese or otherwise. Consequently, he has made artificial, but

rather clear distinctions between Asians in professional roles, namely the associates and partners (if any), and Asians who function as support staff.

While undoubtedly this perspective may appear to be particularly odd, if not wholly quixotic, it is not an entirely isolated or unusual dynamic. Frequently, people will treat members within the same racial or ethnic group differently based primarily upon professional and/or socio-economic classifications. Remember, even the pudding-loving Bill Cosby unequivocally blamed low-income black folks for the social ills of

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the African-American.

So, in this partner's eyes, you and other accomplished Asian attorneys are different from the Asian proletariat because of the different roles that you occupy. You're different because you are an Ivy League graduate; you're different because you work on complex transactions requiring sophistication and intellect. So, in the end, you're simply not like those other Asians who occupy support functions. These differences make you better, more valuable and what is most critical, perhaps, even more like the partner himself. Therefore, he feels comfortable reserving his prejudicial comments for Asians (and probably other ethnic groups) in support roles.

Is this way of thinking completely ridiculous? Of course it is—but, unfortunately, some people have a dire need to rationalize race and ethnicity and they use class distinctions to do so.

So far, it appears your client exposure, as well as your assignments, have been favorable, so it may be that you will live to learn with this rather off-beat character. But don't sleep on this—keep your eyes and ears open because it's clear that this partner has some issues that may create a problem for you when partnership discussions become imminent.

On the one hand, his comments may be the product of a hopeless Neanderthal—annoying as the dickens but ultimately non-contagious. On the other, his sentiments may pose a more pernicious and insidious threat that will impair your career prospects.

In either case, please be sure to implement a strategy whereby you obtain the support of other key firm partners. Also, be receptive to opportu-

nities outside of the firm just in case. You're a phenomenal attorney with a will of steel so I know you will shine!

I am a Latino male associate at a major law firm. From the time I attended college, I have been assigned a mentor: one in college, one in law school and now one at my New York law firm. I graduated from an Ivy League college and a Top 10 law school. My parents are professionals so it's not like I come from an underprivileged background. I really don't think that this new mentor assignment from my firm will be helpful to me. Right now, I just want to focus on being a successful associate. When is the best time to put the mentoring process on hold?

Absolutely never! Make no mistake—mentoring is a life-long, continual process that is positively essential at every single stage of your professional development. No attorney—absolutely no one—whether Latino, Asian, black, white, female—whatever—can successfully navigate through the amorphous terrain of New York law firm culture without at least one solid mentor (usually more). Particularly as an associate of color, you need to learn how to decode a language that is outside the realm of your experience no matter how privileged your background may be.

Exclusion is a powerful tool and can effectively operate to derail the most promising of law careers. Trust me, your Ivy League background has not prepared you for this journey. The Ivy League background gets you a good look from the firm and allows you to pass through a preliminary filter. It does not, however, enable you to decipher the language of the inner circle.

If you want to be a successful attor-

ney, you must have not just one mentor but a series of them. Formal mentor assignments are helpful because they enable you to discern unique institutional nuances that are critical to understanding your environment and the expectations that come along with the territory. Informal mentors are essential: These are the seasoned professionals who take you under their wing, usually because they value your talents and recognize untapped potential.

Just about every firm partner, especially those of color, will tell you in a heartbeat that much of their career success is due to relationships that enabled their hard work, intelligence and savvy to be recognized by firm members who were empowered to validate their achievements. Choosing not to include mentoring as an integral component of your career development is an affirmative decision to toil away in obscurity and wind up with a doomed half-baked career.

Do not restrict your mentoring relationships to people who look like you or come from similar cultural backgrounds. It is imperative that you expand your horizons and get out of your comfort zone as some of your most instrumental mentors will be white and male.

Listen—to abandon the mentoring process is a de facto abandonment of your career—it's foolish—don't do it! •

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