

2021 DIVERSE ATTORNEYS OF THE YEAR

Everett M. Johnson, Esq.: Supporting Future Generations Is 'Personal to Me'

“It means a lot to me to be involved in programs that I believe will make a measurable difference in the lives of kids, especially those in Newark, because those kids are my friends and me. It is personal to me.”

What do you see as your signature successes or career-defining accomplishments?

As a kid growing up in the West Ward of Newark, I never fathomed that I would become a lawyer, much less the first African American attorney promoted to shareholder at Wilentz, Goldman & Spitzer, P.A. As a leader of the diversity initiative at Wilentz, I’m proud of creating and rolling out our summer Diversity Internship Program, which offers minority, LGBTQ, and economically disadvantaged first-year law students with an opportunity to learn and grow by working in a large New Jersey law firm. I think the two are intertwined because although I am one of a handful of minorities to ever become shareholder at the firm, I want to make sure that there are many more to follow.

I’m motivated to deliver value and results that help my clients achieve their goals and I have been fortunate to represent them on many high-profile public finance projects. Recently, I represented the Newark Parking Authority in financing the construction of a 510-parking space garage, office space for the City of Newark’s finance department and municipal court, and executive offices for the Newark Parking Authority. The financing required me to negotiate a parking agreement with the owners of the New Jersey Devils, negotiate a lease with the City of Newark for the use of its office space, and negotiate the terms of the bond financing with the mortgage lender and its counsel. I feel pride when I drive past the newly completed facility that contributes to the revitalization of downtown Newark and, for years to come, will generate significant revenue for the city.

What advice would you offer to a lawyer looking to achieve such success?

I would advise lawyers to focus on learning their craft and continue to challenge themselves throughout their careers. Learning is the gateway to personal and professional growth. I would also advise lawyers to start networking and developing relationships early in their careers, and not wait to become a senior associate or partner to starting building a book of business. It may take years for relationships to develop into business, and often firms require the ability to develop business as a precedent to electing partners. Relationships offer business opportunities, and being a highly competent lawyer allows one to translate those opportunities into longstanding, satisfied clients and friends.



Everett M. Johnson is a public finance partner and Co-Chair of the Diversity Committee at Wilentz, Goldman & Spitzer, P.A.

What are law firms and other organizations missing when it comes to developing and retaining talent?

All organizations need to understand that diversity, equity and inclusion are important to an organization's success. In particular, in the legal industry where clients are diverse and want to know their lawyers can relate to their backgrounds and cultures. I think some firms view diverse recruiting as check-the-box hires and don't really value how diversity positively affects their bottom line. It is difficult for law firms to retain talent in general, but even more so with diverse attorneys. The number of African American and Latino partners at midsize and large firms is abysmal. It is not because of legal acumen or lack of talent. It is primarily because minorities don't always see a path to success at firms. They don't always have the relationships and the network to land clients, which is a significant factor in ascending to partnership. I would like to see firms implement mentoring programs that assist diverse attorneys in becoming partners, and to involve minority attorneys in speaking engagements and business pitches. I would also like firms to make a concerted effort to involve diverse attorneys in firm operations and management decisions. I believe law firms will increase retention of diverse attorneys if those attorneys feel "included" in the firm culture, feel there is an opportunity for success within their firms, and feel their voices and concerns are heard.

What has been your experience with diversity in the profession, and how does it factor into your day-to-day work as an attorney?

I don't see enough diversity at law firms in general, especially at the counsel and partnership levels. There is also a lack of diversity among judges, prosecutors, and other legal professionals. In particular, there is not a lot of diversity amongst the attorneys in public finance, which is my field of practice. I am usually the only African American attorney in the working group on my transactions. However, my clients are very diverse, and I think the demand for diverse attorneys is growing. I am encouraged by the initiatives that firms have implemented in the last couple of years to try to address diversity issues. On a day-to-day basis, I strive to bring my perspective to my clients and into my transactions. Understanding the perspectives of my clients helps me better represent their interests. I understand that I would not be where I am today, if it were not for the work of those who came before me. I honor their work by giving my best effort every day and mindfully creating opportunities for the next generation of attorneys who will come after me.

"Making a difference" can have many meanings. What does it mean to you?

"Making a difference" to me means being involved in activities and causes, whether social, economic, political, or financial, that enhance the lives of others or positively impacts others. It means doing your best to make things better for others to have opportunities that may not have been easily accessible to them. I serve on several not-for-profit boards, and the common theme is that all perform work that I believe will make a positive difference in the lives of families, and particularly children. My friends and I did not know a lot of professionals growing up, but I was fortunate to have a loving and stable home environment. A lot of my friends were less fortunate, and many struggled throughout their youth and continue to struggle today. I believe most of them would have very successful careers if they had the benefit of mentorship, guidance, resources, and a stable home environment. For these reasons and more, it means a lot to me to be involved in programs that I believe will make a measurable difference in the lives of kids, especially those in Newark, because those kids are my friends and me. It is personal to me.

**Everett M. Johnson, Esq.**

Shareholder and Co-Chair, Diversity Committee

T: 732.855.6149 | F: 732.726.6645

ejohnson@wilentz.com

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