

The lawyer who knows better than anyone ‘there’s no limit to equality’

Shauna Clark, who was a trailblazer long before the era of Black Lives Matter, talks to **Louisa Clarence-Smith**

What is it like to be the only black woman at a company? For Shauna Clark, who was 23 when she joined Fulbright & Jaworski, a law firm in Houston, Texas, in 1994, it was isolating and she considered quitting. “I had nothing in common with the people I worked with ... I had to create a persona that was not black, that did not appear to be interested or motivated by issues that were focused on the empowerment or betterment of black people.”

She tried to make older white men, with whom she had lunch every day, feel comfortable around her. “I knew the conversation would start with some far-right pundit that I hated to hear about, then it would segue into something about sports from last night that I had no interest in ... something about one of the kids or the wife that I had no interest in.” To try to fit in, she started memorising soundbites from her boyfriend about sports games that she could parrot at lunches.

Once she had shared enough of this persona, she believes it gave the firm’s partners a reason to invest in it. The lunches also became less painful. “I became genuinely interested in what they had to say, not because I agreed or not, but because I started to look at them as people who were part of my team.”

Clark has come a long way from her childhood in Louisiana, where her only exposure to lawyers was watching *Matlock*, a 1980s legal drama. In December, she was appointed global chairwoman of the firm, which merged with Norton Rose in 2013 to form Norton Rose Fulbright. It employs about 4,300 people in more than 50 cities including Houston, New York, Hong Kong, Toronto, Sydney and Johannesburg.

About a third of its lawyers are in Europe, mostly in London, where it offers legal services to businesses, financial institutions, governments and other public sector organisations. Recent big deals have included working with Carlsberg on the brewer’s £780 million joint venture with Marston’s, the pubs company.

Clark also heads the firm’s employment and labour practice in the United States. At the moment, its work is dominated by the complexities of Covid-19 for employers, including corporate restructurings and whether companies will be allowed to make vaccines for employees mandatory.

About a third of her role involves advising clients on diversity and



DARRYL HOWARD/NORTON ROSE FULBRIGHT

Shauna Clark believes that attitudes have improved since she became a lawyer, but the global boss of Norton Rose Fulbright still encounters difficult moments

inclusion issues. Corporate America, from Wall Street to Silicon Valley, pledged to do more to combat “systemic racism” in response to the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement last year, which came in the wake of the death of George Floyd, who was killed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, after allegedly

using a counterfeit bill to buy cigarettes. JP Morgan Chase pledged \$30 billion to help to close the racial wealth gap. Jamie Dimon, the bank’s chief executive, said: “Systemic racism is a tragic part of America’s history. We can do more and do better to break down systems that have propagated racism and widespread economic inequality, especially for Black and Latinx people.”

British companies also came out in force to pledge their support for black communities, but that enthusiasm has not translated to boardrooms. There are no black leaders in the top three jobs at any of Britain’s FTSE 100 companies, a report revealed this week.

Clark is uncomfortable with the direct correlation between Black



Q&A

Who is your mentor?

A partner at the firm who never stopped sponsoring me, invited me to events and gave me clients

Does money motivate you?

It’s not at the top of the things that motivate me, other than I never want to be poor again

What was the most important moment in your career?

Lives Matter and workforce diversity. “Black Lives Matter is too important to be watered down, to try to extrapolate to diversity and inclusion. It’s different. My life continues whether I’m a partner, a global chair ... It continues whether my compensation is halved or not. It doesn’t look the same, though, if my boy doesn’t come home to me.”

Her advice for executives who want to have open conversations and to lead a diverse group of people is to read about that group. “You have to know your people and you can learn your people. But chief executives are far too busy to have that many conversations. I think that some

When I tried my first case

Which person do you most admire?

My mom. She died at 53 and was phenomenal

Favourite TV show?

Law and Order, left

How do you relax?

Reading a book with a glass of wine and a couple of pieces of chocolate

What does leadership mean to you?

It’s the privilege and opportunity to inspire and motivate and help others in whatever capacity

CV

Age: 51

Education: Louisiana State University; Tulane Law School

Career: 1994: joined Fulbright & Jaworski;

2003: made partner at the firm; 2014: head of employment and labour, Norton Rose Fulbright;

2021: Global and US chairwoman, Norton Rose Fulbright

Family: Married with four children

initiatives fail when there is not a clear understanding of how companies will achieve equality and diversity, and what inclusion means and looks like. “If one person says, ‘what about me?’, that is a legitimate concern that we have to respond to, otherwise it tears at the fabric of what we’re trying to do.”

Progress on diversity in the legal services industry has been poor since Clark started her career. Black female representation has remained at about 2 per cent for the past two decades. At Norton Rose Fulbright, 77 per cent of US and UK partners are from black or minority ethnic backgrounds, rising to 26.3 per cent for associates.

Attitudes have improved since Clark started as a lawyer — some people questioned whether she could write because she was a black woman — but she still encounters difficulties. She was told recently by a white man that he didn’t see her as a “black woman”.

Her response was: “Well, that says more about my ability to make you comfortable with me than it says about you. Because how could you not see something that’s such a big part of who I am?”

If a 23-year-old black woman joining the firm today lunched with older like-minded men, should they make the effort to find out about her interests? It seems unlikely. “When that happens, we will be there,” Clark says. “We will have arrived when that happens.”