

BCLP Atty's Path From Backup Receptionist To Office Leader

By James Mills

Law360 (May 23, 2024, 9:03 AM EDT) -- For Puanani Norwood, becoming the leader of a law office was always on her list of long-term goals.

She just wasn't expecting to get the opportunity to helm Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner LLP's Los Angeles office a mere five months after making partner at the firm.

"I just never in a million years expected it would happen as quickly as it did," said Norwood, a real estate and renewable energy attorney.

That promotion, announced earlier this month, marks the latest chapter in a legal career that began with Norwood working as a backup receptionist at Shook Hardy & Bacon LLP before ultimately joining BCLP out of law school nine years ago.

About 2½ years ago, Norwood transferred from BCLP's Kansas City, Missouri, office to the Los Angeles shop, where she will now lead 27 attorneys and 17 staff members.

"My biggest goal is to work on our branding and our presence in the market to make sure we're thought of as the competitive Los Angeles office [that] we are," Norwood said.

Law360 Pulse chatted with Norwood about becoming office managing partner, how she plans to accomplish her goals and how she became an attorney. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Congratulations on being named office managing partner. How did this all come about?

It was a complete surprise for me, to be honest, because I was just promoted to partner in January. Being an OMP was something on my long-term goal list of things to do. I always view it as a great opportunity to be a spokesperson, not just for the firm but for the people in that particular office. I was always looking forward to doing something like that; I just never in a million years expected it would happen as quickly as it did.

I got a call from Steve Baumer, our CEO, who said, "Hey, I want to run something by you." I've held a lot of leadership positions throughout my career as an associate. I wasn't caught off-guard or surprised to hear that part of it, but he mentioned that our prior OMP, Chris Dueringer, was looking to step back because he had served for 4 ½ years and was ready to transition into his practice full-time. It turns out I



Puanani Norwood

was on both of their lists of potential successors. In talking it through with others and partners in firm leadership, everyone thought it was a good idea.

Since it was something on my list, even though I wasn't expecting it to happen when it did, I just wasn't going to say no to the opportunity. There are a number of people who are involved in the conversation who have a lot of experience in this position and other positions of leadership in the firm; I trust their judgment, and they clearly think I am ready and believe in me. I'm willing to do my best.

What are your plans for the LA office?

I think a lot of people look at our office and see that we're based in Santa Monica and maybe write off the office as being a sleepy beachside law firm. My biggest goal is to work on our branding and our presence in the market to make sure we're thought of as the competitive Los Angeles office [that] we are. We have this global platform behind us. We have incredible lawyers in our office who have argued in front of the Supreme Court. They're quoted in the media with respect to their various practice expertise. They're representing some of the largest in the music industry. We have great tax lawyers, franchise lawyers. We have an amazing team in this market. I don't want people to forget that we're not just a Santa Monica office, we're an LA office. We definitely have the knowledge and depth of bench strength to be able to support a lot of the things that are happening in this type of market.

In the next couple of months, I'm sitting down with each of our partners and associates to have deeper conversations with them. Where do they see themselves fitting into that picture and that dynamic? What have they seen as some of the challenges for their practice? How can we all team up together and "hunt in packs," as I say, and start to get out in the market in a bigger presence and to make people more aware of what we're capable of here?

What are the office's strongest practice areas?

We have a robust litigation and appellate practice — we have litigators who have argued before the U.S. Supreme Court on more than one occasion, others who successfully manage bankruptcy and restructuring matters and several who have a wealth of experience in the courtroom and handling alternative dispute resolution. Our team has also defended numerous class action claims in various industries.

We also have a Chambers USA-rated franchise practice that has a world-class reputation as a firm of choice for franchisors. The group has more California board certified franchise specialists than any other law firm, with experience in restaurant and food distribution, automotive, hotels and lodging, alcohol distribution and agriculture.

Additionally, we have an expanding corporate group involved in mergers, acquisitions, corporate restructuring and finance transactions. Members of the group are also focused on real estate matters including representation of financial institutions, real estate investment trusts, financing transactions and renewable energy projects. We also have transactional lawyers who are involved in advising clients on the rapid developments happening in technology and artificial intelligence.

You're one of the few Native Hawaiians, man or woman, to ever become an OMP.

Coming up in my career I've always noticed the low ratios of women in law firm leadership, particularly diverse women in law firm leadership. The population of Native Hawaiians is low on its own, and even

more so for those who find themselves practicing law. I have had so many men, women, diverse lawyers, nondiverse lawyers and professional staff reach out to express their genuine excitement and support for me in this role. I believe we've reached a critical point in history where people understand the power of representation — in seeing is believing.

Every lawyer has taken a unique path to reach their current position. My hope is to be able to use this platform to encourage the next generation of Native Hawaiian and mixed-race lawyers to continue to dream big and pursue leadership roles in their firms, while encouraging other firms to also be bold in acknowledging talent and experience where due, even if doing so doesn't look the same as has always been done. I'm proud not only to join the ranks of diverse women in law firm leadership, but to also be a Native Hawaiian leading in this space.

Tell us about your background. When did you get interested in the law?

I grew up in Kansas City, Kansas. My mom's family is Native Hawaiian; my dad is white and he was a Marine. A few years after I was born, they moved back to Kansas City to be closer to my dad's family. My dad was a commercial roofer, and my mom worked in a grocery store. At night, they would clean office buildings. They didn't have anyone they were comfortable leaving me with at night, so they would take me with them at night to clean these office buildings. I would pack up my backpack with books and homework, they would put me in someone's office to do my homework at someone's big desk and I would fall asleep under the desk. I would wake up the next morning at home in my own bed. I thought it was so cool to do my homework in the really cool office. And now, to be in a position where I have my own office is pretty cool.

We had a lot of family members who were in and out of prison for various reasons. I always remember looking at the lawyers in court, thinking, The people who are the lawyers are trying to get you to stop causing so much pain around you. They're trying to protect you. At a very young age, I knew I wanted to be a lawyer, but I didn't know what that meant because no one else [we knew] had done it.

I went to college [at the University of Kansas] and was waiting tables full-time, but had some health issues and had to quit college. I lost my health insurance and had to go on bed rest to get my health back on track. Once I got back on my feet, I thought, I don't know how to go to law school now, as I'm saddled with a lot of medical debt.

I thought, If I can't be a lawyer, I'm going to work with lawyers. So I took a job at Shook Hardy & Bacon as a backup receptionist. I also helped the records supervisor with sorting and filing documents, and eventually I was offered a full-time position in the records center. I worked my way up to the point I was doing a lot of paralegal work — I was helping litigators prep for trial and making sure their files were organized and they had however many copies of whatever they needed.

Eventually, I took a position as the diversity coordinator [at Shook Hardy]. I met so many lawyers for whom the practice of law was their second career. They really rallied around me, coached me and helped get me back on track. So I went to law school [at the University of Missouri — Kansas City School of Law] when I was 32.

How did you get to California?

My husband and I have always wanted to live closer to the ocean — it was on our bucket list. We had always said to ourselves, "Maybe we can save up some money and retire in California, retire next to the

beach one day." When COVID happened, my dad had passed away and we all were going through these world changes and life changes. We looked at each other and decided this was an opportunity we didn't want to miss.

I had a really solid real estate-renewable energy practice, working primarily on projects based in the Midwest. I went to the firm and said, "I've built the team here in the Midwest. I would love to expand this and satisfy a personal goal of being closer to the ocean by moving to California. It would also satisfy a business goal of mine to expand my practice and learn about all these new renewable energy technologies that are happening in the fourth-largest economy in the world." I'm excited to tap into what's happening here [in California with renewable energy] and find a way to help that initiative.

Now I have about eight lawyers based all across the Midwest who are doing a fantastic job of leading a lot of wind and solar developments for our clients in that region. Now that I'm here, I'm learning more about the solar work happening in California, but also some of the other stuff that's happening, like water sustainability, battery storage, all of this new technology that California gets to be on the forefront of developing.

How did you get into real estate?

I had great mentors in Mike Humphrey and Steve Becker, both in our Kansas City office. I came in wanting to be a litigator, because that's what I knew when I was at Shook Hardy & Bacon. But at the time I joined [BCLP in 2015], real estate was super busy. Litigation wasn't. They said, "Hey, will you try this out and see what you think? If you hate it, we'll figure it out." Mike Humphrey really helped me to understand what it meant to be a real estate lawyer and find the things that I like about it. I love jigsaw puzzles. He helped me think of when we're doing a development, we're trying to piece together all these different puzzle pieces of property to make sure that we have everything we need to have a successful project. Looking at it in that light, I've really loved it.

I also love that with the real estate practice, there is a tangible end. I can drive around town and point to a business and say, "I helped them get their lease," or "I helped them manage that property," or drive by a wind farm and say, "I helped build that." It really brought a connection back to my dad. He would do that in Kansas City and point at all these giant office buildings he put the roof on and say, "I did that." I love the fact that I have been fortunate enough to be at a firm where I've been able to mold my practice that's not just personally satisfying but is actually doing good for the world.

--Editing by Alanna Weissman.