



(Credit: Shutterstock.com)

[Q&A](#)

How I Made Law Firm Chief Talent, Diversity & Inclusion Leader: 'Find Your Voice. Be Authentically You, and Be Persistent,' Says Shalanna Pirtle of Parker Poe

"Life is too short to not take control of your life and your destiny."

July 13, 2022 at 10:58 AM

9 minute read

[How I Made It](#)

[Tasha Norman](#)

Shalanna L. Pirtle, 41, Parker Poe, Charlotte, North Carolina.

Job Title: Partner and chief talent, diversity and inclusion officer.

In which practice area(s) do you practice? Employment and labor. alternative dispute resolution, litigation and disability access.

Law school and year of graduation: University of Georgia School of Law, J.D., 2007.

How long have you been a partner at the firm? Over five years.



Shalanna L. Pirtle. (Courtesy photo)

Were you a partner at another firm before joining your present firm? No. I am homegrown, as we like to say. The firm hired me as a summer intern following my second year of law school and gave me a permanent offer after that summer went well. I have been with Parker Poe ever since.

What criteria did you use when deciding to join your current firm? I was part of the training team at a large international restaurant group in Atlanta before law school. I trained servers at my home restaurant, trained other trainers in my market and was part of the opening team for several restaurants. Through that experience, I realized I was interested in employment law. I saw that Parker Poe had a strong employment practice and I had a great experience as a summer intern. I was drawn to the sophistication of the work, the people and overall culture at the firm of service to our communities beyond the practice of law.

What was the biggest surprise you experienced in leading the firm's key initiative? Over the last six months, Parker Poe has invested a significant amount of resources in creating its Talent Management Department, which is responsible for the firm's diversity, equity and inclusion, recruiting and professional development efforts. The hope is that we'll be better positioned to seamlessly weave the concepts of diversity, equity and inclusion throughout all of our operations and decision-making over time. I took on my current role overseeing these efforts after having served as the interim director of diversity when the team member who previously held that position left the firm mid-2021. I chaired the firm's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee for

roughly five years, so I had key insights to firm operations, budgeting and priorities. Quite frankly, I've been most (pleasantly) surprised at the level of resources my partners have given this effort, both by elevating the DEI and overall talent management profiles to the senior executive leadership of the firm, and by investing in four staff members in addition to me to further this work.

What's the key to running a successful initiative, in your opinion? With respect to diversity, equity and inclusion, in particular, but talent management generally, the keys are creativity and patience but also a sense of urgency. Our people (attorneys and staff alike) are our No. 1 asset. If we're going to continue to build a first-class team set up to lead this firm several generations into the future, we have to be nimble, flexible and willing to come up with creative ways to meet our people's needs while serving our clients. We can't just think outside the box—we have to operate like the box doesn't exist! This is marathon work, so we have to be patient as we wait for results of our efforts to come to fruition. Yet we also have to move with a sense of urgency to meet the moment before it passes us by.

What's the key to successful business development in your opinion and how do you grow professionally while everyone is navigating a hybrid work system? I've been a single mother for the majority of my practice, and the entirety of my child's life. I had to take a different approach to business development. I didn't have the time or flexibility to take clients golfing or out to a spa, etc., and still get my work done, while raising my son. Nor did all my clients necessarily have interest in those traditional types of activities. I had to get creative and also find activities in which my clients and I could both involve our families. I also learned how to be "present" for the life events of most significance to them, even if I wasn't physically there. I had to find other innovative ways to stay in front of and top of mind for them without killing myself in the process. And I had to remember that, much like DEI work, successful BD is often marathon work, and you have to have patience while building those relationships. All of this remains true in a hybrid environment where some folks are still working away from a typical office setting. Creativity, flexibility and patience remain the keys.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your leadership role? I've been fortunate to have a collection of mentors in the law and outside of the legal community throughout my adult life. Some helped me navigate law firm politics. Some have become close confidants who know what drives me and who aren't afraid to challenge me to think bigger and beyond the known. Some have helped me frame what I'd like my legacy to be. All have reminded me in various ways of my power, strengths and confidence in myself and my ability to take each step (or leap in some instances) in the journey that ultimately led to this point.

What's the best piece of advice you could give a partner who wants to make it to firm leadership and/or manage key firm initiatives? Leadership is hard and sometimes lonely, and there aren't usually a bunch of people tripping over themselves to volunteer for the work. Be sure to do the work for the right reasons—because you have a passion for the new initiative, you are good at or have a passion for helping members of the firm along their career journeys, or you can provide a needed skill for the firm at this moment in time and you have a passion for serving others in one way or another. If you are motivated by anything else, it will show, and you may lose the respect of the very people you need as allies and supporters along the way.

When it comes to career planning and navigating inside a law firm, in your opinion, what's the most common mistake you see other attorneys making? The most common mistake I see from inexperienced attorneys is a lack of patience to develop the skills and relationships to be successful. Both are necessary, and at some point, the relationships become critical. People will eventually presume you do great work as you matriculate through the firm, but you have to connect with people and get them to trust you. That includes going to firm retreats, participating in local or state bar leadership, spending time with people in casual settings including having meals or drinks

(even if it's just a Shirley Temple) and taking part in the conversations. Failure to demonstrate that you will roll up your sleeves, get in the trenches and work side-by-side with people, internal and external clients alike, will result in those individuals thinking of others before they think of you.

If you had a chance to advise or mentor your younger self, what advice would you give to yourself? I would remind myself, at every stage, to think really hard about what Shalanna's definition of success is so that I would more wisely spend my time investing in meeting my definition, instead of letting other people define success for me and spinning my wheels to meet their needs. I would ask myself whether my current work, goals, future plans and path I'm on are serving and meeting my needs. Or are they better serving and meeting the needs of my employer as opposed to me? Until you understand that for yourself, you will spend the rest of your life trying to fit into someone else's neat little box. Life is too short to not take control of your life and your destiny, so you better get to figuring some things out!

As a leader at the firm, what's the best career/leadership advice you would give to up-and-coming diverse leaders? "Find your voice. Be authentically you. Be persistent. Remember that everything is possible and that "no" to ideas in the business context doesn't necessarily mean never, it may just mean not right now."

What challenges did you face or overcome in your career path, and what was the lesson learned? Becoming a single mom in the second year of my legal career without any local familial support was an incredible challenge. I've also had severe, life-altering health challenges throughout my career. In managing both, I had to learn to prioritize my health and my family if I wanted to be around long-term to provide for us and to leave a legacy for my son. They have given me incredible perspective as I learned to always keep the main thing, the main thing.

What impact would you like to have on the legal industry as a whole? I'd like to influence the hiring, utilization and retention of more diverse attorneys in my firm's footprint and across the board.

What lessons, if any, did you learn in 2020 / 2021 (the COVID years)? It's OK to say "no"—and realize that that word is a complete sentence all by itself. And cherish the time you have. Tomorrow isn't promised.

What is one mistake you witness leaders making more frequently than others? Firm leaders aren't always as in touch with what individual lawyers or staff find valuable or of most importance. Some lawyers are motivated by working long hours for more money. Others are motivated by benefits and flexibility. Others just want an environment where they are viewed as a valuable member of the team and have opportunities for growth and development. Some leaders seem to be clueless about their team members' needs and motivation and thus consistently miss the mark in trying to deliver a highly sought-after work environment or meet employees' ever-changing needs. Or they don't move urgently enough to meet the moment.

For more career advancement advice and success stories, check out the "How I Made It" Q&A series on Law.com.

*ALM's Professionals Network on LinkedIn, **Advancing Future Leaders**. We are excited about this pivotal group. [Click here to join](#).*

You Might Like

July 08, 2022

How I Made Office Managing Partner: 'I Do My Best to Lead by Example,' Says Daniel Laguardia, Shearman & Sterling

By [Tasha Norman](#)

6 minute read

June 30, 2022

How I Started My Own Law Firm: 'A Constant Focus on the Well-Being and Happiness of Your Team Members,' Says Luis Salazar of Salazar Law

By [Tasha Norman](#)

6 minute read

June 15, 2022

Could a Four-Day Week Work in Big Law?

By [Hannah Walker](#)

5 minute read

June 28, 2022

How I Made Partner: 'Have Solid Reasons for Why Your Firm Should Make You a Partner, or Why They Can't Risk That You Leave the Firm,' Says Megan LaDriere White, Baker Botts

By [Tasha Norman](#)

7 minute read

LAW FIRMS MENTIONED

Andreas Reiner & Partner

Parker Poe Adams & Bernstein LLP

Trending Law Firms This Week

- **Jackson Lewis**
21 new blips
- **Littler Mendelson**
19 new blips
- **Kirkland & Ellis**
18 new blips
- **Morgan & Morgan**
17 new blips
- **Lewis Brisbois Bisgaard & Smith**
16 new blips

TRENDING STORIES

Sidley and Law Firms Get Warning From Texas Lawmakers on Abortion Pay Policy

THE AMERICAN LAWYER

Big Law Unlikely to Bow to Texas Freedom Caucus' Threats on Abortion Travel

THE AMERICAN LAWYER

New York Chief Judge Janet DiFiore Announces She Is Stepping Down

NEW YORK LAW JOURNAL

'A Lot of People Are Not Busy': When M&A Slows, the Whole Firm Feels It

THE AMERICAN LAWYER

Lawyer Can't Have 2 'Masters': A Judge Just Disqualified This New Jersey Law Firm

NEW JERSEY LAW JOURNAL

[Go To Law.com Radar](#)

What to Expect With Mergers, Leverage, Costs, Clients and Morale: Your Questions About Am Law 100 Trends Answered

Where the Am Law 200 Have Risks in a Downturn

Diversity Scorecard 2022



Mentioned in a Law.com story?

License our industry-leading legal content to extend your thought leadership and build your brand.

[LEARN MORE](#)

FEATURED FIRMS

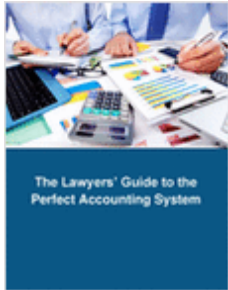
Law Offices of Gary Martin Hays & Associates P.C.
(470) 294-1674

Law Offices of Mark E. Salomone
(857) 444-6468

Smith & Hassler
(713) 739-1250

More From ALM

[Resources](#)[CLE Center](#)[Law.com Compass](#)[Events & Webcasts](#)[Lawjobs](#)[Professional Announcements](#)



Lawyer's Guide to the Perfect Accounting System

Brought to you by LawPay
[Download Now](#)



Getting Paid: What Lawyers Need to Know

Brought to you by LawPay
[Download Now](#)



Credit Card Mythbusting: 7 Reasons Law Firms Still Resist Online Payments

Brought to you by LawPay
[Download Now](#)

[Go to Resources](#)

Legal Newswire

[Traffic Accident Resource Offers 24/7 Help to Consumers & Attorneys](#)

[DivorceHelp123 Launches New App for Family Lawyers in Ohio, Texas, Louisiana, Al...](#)

[BMCS Sumcoin Index Fund Announces Sponsorship in the NTT IndyCar Series and the ...](#)

[Cimplifi Enhances PowerCI Application with Total Workspace Transparency](#)

[Submit a press release](#)

Sign Up Today and Never Miss Another Story

As a part of your digital membership, you can sign up for an unlimited number of a wide range of complimentary newsletters. Visit your My Account page to make your selections. Get the timely legal news and critical analysis you cannot afford to miss. Tailored just for you. In your inbox. Every day.

[Subscribe to ALM Legal Publications Newsletters](#)

The industry-leading media platform offering competitive intelligence to prepare for today and anticipate opportunities for future success.

[About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Advertise With Us](#) | [Customer Service](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)



Copyright © 2022 ALM Global, LLC. All Rights Reserved.