



ABOVE FROM LEFT: The NEW Roundtable Inc. Board of Directors: Courtney Barksdale Perez, Chalón Clark Thomas, Keitha Wright, Chasity Wilson Henry, and Kandace Walter.

Much has been written and myriad panels have been convened on the topic of diversity and inclusion in the legal profession. This holds true across a variety of legal practices, including corporate law firms and corporate legal departments. Yet, according to National Association for Law Placement statistics, representation of women of color in the associate and partner ranks has stagnated and, in some cases, declined over the past decade. Given this backdrop, how might women of color navigate implicit and explicit bias and other roadblocks to build a successful career? Building, nurturing, and maintaining a strong network is vital for every lawyer and especially so for women of color. The Network of Empowered Women, or NEW, Roundtable Inc., provides an example of how being intentional in supporting one another can be personally and professionally rewarding.

The NEW Roundtable Inc. is a nonprofit organization comprising more than 80 black women in-house and outside counsel attorneys in Dallas. NEW was founded in 2014 to drive the inclusion and advancement of black women attorneys through targeted relationship-building, professional development initiatives, and mentoring.

The organization began with about a dozen black women in Dallas—primarily graduates of the University of Texas School of Law—who were junior to mid-level corporate law firm associates and in-house counsel, circa 2011 to 2014. A couple of friends and classmates, including Courtney Barksdale Perez, now a partner in Carter Arnett but then a fourth-year associate at a Dallas law firm, began organizing

periodic happy hours for the group to reconnect. As the group continued to gather to discuss its successes and challenges, group members recognized some recurring themes with respect to the challenges many were facing in their professional development.

Law firm associates faced challenges receiving mentoring, sponsorship, “choice” work assignments, client contact, and business development opportunities—all factors in partnership decisions down the line. In-house counsel struggled to make connections with executive leadership teams, navigate the political landscape, and attain the visibility and influence both internally and within the legal community necessary to ascend to general counsel and other leadership roles.

After having these conversations and brainstorming solutions over a number of months and years, group members began to look around the table and realize that many of the opportunities they were seeking but to which they had little access—business development, refinement of technical skills, speaking, writing, brand-building opportunities, and just moral support—could all be obtained if they leveraged the power of the network they had already been building and became more intentional about helping one another to accomplish their goals.

With the support and encouragement of many members of the informal group, NEW Founder and President Chasity Wilson Henry, now senior vice president, general counsel, and corporate secretary at CECO Environmental, took steps to formalize the group in mid-2014. By then, the group had

expanded beyond UT Law alumna to include dozens of African American women (ranging from junior to mid-level and a few senior associates) with a mix of private and in-house practitioners. On October 22, 2014, Elizabeth Brandon (a founding member) hosted the new group at Vinson & Elkins' Dallas office. There were around 25 attendees. Henry gave a presentation and invited discussion of how members might become more purposeful and impactful as a group. The response was extremely enthusiastic from that core group of women who would become the founding members of the NEW Roundtable.

NEW stands for Network of Empowered Women while Roundtable is a metaphor for how the group operates. NEW is a group of women leveraging its collective talents and networks to overcome challenges and spur each other to success. Group members did not always have the opportunity to join those tables initially, so they created their own. And now, more than 80 black women lawyers in Dallas have been invited to pull up a chair.

The mission remains unwavering: to *empower, impact, and influence* the legal community by (i) achieving individual goals collectively and attaining group success through building mutually beneficial relationships between in-house and outside counsel, facilitating career-development and advancement initiatives, and securing and sustaining relationships with career influencers; (ii) generating and facilitating opportunities for members to impact the profession and the community through board service, leadership programs, publishing, and speaking engagements; and (iii) influencing the legal profession through partnering with law firms, in-house legal departments, and other legal employers to increase and improve the recruitment, hiring, retention, and promotion of black women and partnering with law schools to help black women law students to be academically successful.

Since its inception, NEW has facilitated job placements, professional awards, board placements, business referrals, speaking engagements, and publishing opportunities for its members, representing over 30 law firms and 40 in-house legal departments in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, with members working for companies such as AT&T, Toyota, and FedEx Office and law firms including Gibson Dunn, Baker Botts, and Clark Hill Strasburger. NEW has been instrumental in the professional development and career advancement of its members. More than a dozen members have received job interviews and placements (both in-house and at law firms).

Over the past five years, with the help of its members, career influencers, and mentors, in-house members have provided law firm members with business opportunities valued in the hundreds of thousands of dollars collectively. Moreover, several members' origination credit within their law firms is directly attributable to NEW business referrals (one member has received 40% of her origination credit in just one year from the group). Dozens more members have been invited to participate as panelists and keynote speakers at legal conferences, bar associations, and other professional events. NEW members have nominated and been nominated by one

another for dozens of awards (and have won many of them), including D CEO Corporate Counsel Awards, D Magazine Best Lawyers Under 40, Texas Lawbook Corporate Counsel Awards, and Texas Rising Stars; provided opportunities for members to join boards through NEW referrals, including the Human Rights Initiative, AT&T Performing Arts Center, and Girls on the Run; participated in dozens of job interviews (and landed jobs) facilitated by members; and most importantly, given back to the profession. For example, for the past two summers, through the Diverse Attorney Pipeline Program, several NEW members have interviewed, coached, and mentored dozens of women of color law students for the DAPP Summer Program, which includes summer internships at partnering law firms and in-house legal departments.



ABOVE: September 2019: Founding and current NEW board members celebrate the organization's accomplishments during the Five-Year Anniversary Gala hosted in Dallas.

A NEW day has come. Women are creating their own paths and sharing their experiences and connections with other women. It is NEW's great hope that women will continue to empower women, lifting each other as they climb and transforming the legal profession in the process. **TBJ**



CHASITY HENRY

is senior vice president, general counsel, and corporate secretary of CECO Environmental Corporation, a global leader in air quality and fluid handling serving the energy, industrial, and other niche markets. Prior to joining CECO, she was assistant general counsel to Kimberly-Clark Corporation in the company's Dallas World Headquarters. Henry is a 2006 graduate of the University of Texas School of Law.



COURTNEY BARKSDALE PEREZ

is a trial attorney and partner in Carter Arnett in Dallas. She has three beautiful children and is married to the love of her life. Barksdale Perez is the chair of the Texas Young Lawyers Association Board of Directors and president-elect of the NEW Roundtable.