

From Summer Associate to Big Law Shareholder: Here's How Yolanda Strader Did It

"At one point, Black women made up less than 1% of partners at large firms, and that statistic can psych you out; it can make you think, what am I doing? Can I actually make it? You have to get over that fear," Carlton Fields' Yolanda Strader said.

by Jasmine Floyd

When "home-grown Carlton-Fielder" Yolanda Strader began her legal career as a summer associate at the firm back in 2007, she felt apprehensive.

"I was so nervous. I felt like a fish out of water," said Strader, whose practice focuses on litigation in the health care, legal, banking and real estate industries.

As a summer intern, Strader worried about the statistics of Black women making partner at a large firm.

"At one point, Black women made up less than 1% of partners at large firms, and that statistic can psych you out; it can make you think, 'What am I doing? Can I actually make it?' You have to get over that fear," Strader said. "You have to realize you are worthy, and realize that your work is equivalent to everyone else's hard work, and that you deserve to become a shareholder."

But Strader recalled her team being so welcoming and collegial when she stepped into the firm, and said she believes if you

put in the time and effort you deserve to be on top and successful, regardless of what statistics say.

Strader said the summer program at Carlton Fields was designed to foster a collegial environment. For example, if Carlton Fields hired 10 summer associates, it is because the firm envisions being able to hire 10 associates once the summer program is over.

One of the ways Strader was able to grow within the firm was forming bonds with her fellow summer associates.

"In fact, Naomi Berry who is a shareholder at the firm, was among the summer associates in my class. We then became friends that first summer and ever since then we continued to check in and look out for each other," Strader said. "That's the sort of relationship that could really help you with your career over the long term."

This year, Strader has received the Daily Business Review's Diversity and Inclusion Award, and was recognized as a 2021 Woman of Impact by the Women's History Coalition of Miami-Dade County,



Courtesy photo

Yolanda Strader of Carlton Fields in Miami.

Inc. Strader said although it was an honor receiving those awards, it only motivates her to continue to work harder.

"Looking at the past honorees, I was thinking to myself, 'I am just starting, I have a lot more work to do,' and it's humbling. It's motivation and inspiration to keep proving myself," Strader said. "Making sure I'm not only a shareholder, but a successful shareholder of the firm. Not just celebrating what I've done in the past for being a past president of the Wilkie D. Ferguson Jr. Bar Association, but doubling down on my efforts with that organization, because it's near and dear to my heart."

What helped Strader stand out from her colleagues was being inquisitive and not being afraid to ask questions. Strader said as a diverse lawyer it will take time to get where you want to be, because you're competing with imposter syndrome and code switching.

"I had to remember to not psych myself out," Strader said. "There's nothing wrong with asking questions and following up. Being a part of the team is what helps you stand out."

Watching her cousin, Miami-Dade Circuit Judge William Johnson, who is a senior judge, sparked Strader's desire to choose a legal career.

When Strader was a tween her father took her and her brother to Johnson's courtroom, and she said what grabbed her interest was the way people stood up when Johnson walked into the room, and the way they referred to him as "your honor" and listened carefully to his rulings.

"As a Black girl, seeing a Black man respected in that way stood out to me," Strader said. "What also stood out was when my cousin showed the children of color in the courtroom respect and dignity."

She said it left an impact on her, and she appreciated the way he was one of the first judges in Miami not to have juveniles shackled in the courtroom.

"That's the type of perspective I want to live up to. That's the honorable career I am looking forward to having," Strader said.

Bringing Diversity Into the Room

Strader said she loves the diversity Carlton Fields has and enjoys seeing lawyers of color thriving in the law firm.

"I am fortunate to work in a firm that truly values diversity, inclusion and equity; it is really a part of our DNA," Strader said. "Being able to work at Carlton Fields and seeing people just like me is motivation for me to want to do well."

She wants to set a good example to all associates, especially to diverse associates, because she knows if they work extremely hard, excel and build their brand they too can climb the ladder to be a shareholder.

Strader attended the University of Miami for both undergrad and law school. She has been practicing for 12 years, during which time she's had a lot of sponsors and mentors.

"I can't begin to say how appreciative I am for those individuals, some of those I didn't even know were sponsoring me," Strader said. "Sometimes you don't know who is in the room advocating for you when you're not present. However, I am grateful they took the time to do that and discuss the business of law and navigating what it's like to be in a law firm."

One sponsor is Neal McAliley, who is a shareholder in their Miami office. Strader had the opportunity to work with McAliley in a two-week final administrative hearing, and they developed a wonderful working relationship, where he taught her about an area of law that she was not involved with before.

"He took the time to teach me about an entirely different area of the law, he also made sure I had an opportunity to shine in front of the clients and at the firm. He also serves the role as a mentor," Strader said. "He is wonderful, and always goes above and beyond."

Strader has advice for individuals who are starting out as summer associates and want to climb the ladder of shareholder.

"You have to realize it's a marathon not a sprint, as a diverse lawyer you have to realize that you are worthy, capable and that you were placed in that position because you absolutely deserve it," Strader said. "You have to put yourself in a position where you make yourself available for opportunities, seeing yourself as part of a team as opposed to looking at individual assignments."

As the mother of two small children, Strader fields a lot of competing demands and every day is different, but she says she's come to understand how to balance her work and her children's needs.

"I have learned to give yourself a break, because there are days quite frankly my job is going to have to take over and I will have to lean on my husband or someone to help me get everything done with respect to the children," Strader said.

Strader said she is grateful to be at a firm that understands her values and knows people have families.

Yolanda Strader

Born: April 1984, Miami

Spouse: Jawan Strader

Children: Sienna/Bryson Strader

Education: University of Miami School of Law, J.D. 2009; University of Miami, B.B.A. 2005

Experience: Carlton Fields, shareholder, 2019-present; Carlton Fields, associate, 2010-2019; Greater Legal Services of Miami, University of Miami Fellow, 2009; Carlton Fields, summer associate, 2007 and 2008.