

How I Made Partner: 'Speak Up, Ask the Questions People Are Afraid to Ask, Be the First to Show Up and the Last to Leave,' Says Susan Gutierrez of Proskauer

By Tasha Norman

Susan Gutierrez, Proskauer, Los Angeles

Law school and year of graduation: UC Berkeley School of Law (Boalt Hall), 2010.

How long have you been at the firm? 11 years; since 2010. I made partner in 2018.

How long were you an associate at the firm? Eight years. I was also a summer associate at Proskauer.

What's the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming partner? The heightened sense of responsibility to the next generation. Mentoring has always been important to me, but when I became a partner, I felt an even stronger drive to pay it forward. I found myself on a platform I'd worked so hard to stand on, but I didn't get there alone; many other partners championed for me to reach this milestone and stand beside them. So my thoughts turned not only to what is next for my own career, but

how I can help other folks trying to get here too.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner? There was no one thing or deciding factor as far as I know. I'd been on a number of successful trials, become critical to institutional clients and made no secret of wanting to be partner. But it was more than that. I mean, I did not grow up around lawyers. We were not wealthy, and I definitely had to hustle growing up, working as a waitress from age 15 and holding multiple jobs throughout school to pay off student loans. The result is that working like a maniac, using common sense and talking like an "average" person are in my blood. I never want to lose any of those traits, because they keep me grounded and help me connect with the jury. I brought that drive and passion to Proskauer and I'd like to think it's worked out.

Describe how you feel now about your career now that you've



Susan L. Gutierrez
Courtesy Photo

made partner. In many respects I feel like my career is just getting started. Being a partner gives me the platform to make the big plays — taking or defending key depositions, arguing the big motion, speaking to a jury. We are in a profession where the title matters, for better or worse. The question is, what do you do with the title? To me, the answer is: make it count. Speak up, ask the questions people are afraid to ask, be the first to show up and the last to leave. If that sounds cliché, so be it. I'm honored to be a partner at Proskauer and I

will keep giving everything I've got to being the best advocate I can be.

What's the key to successful business development in your opinion and how do you grow professionally while everyone is working remotely? Preparation, patience and perseverance. Every rainmaker had a point in her career where she didn't have a single client. It doesn't happen overnight. You put in the work, one day at a time, and you make your clients' business your business. Working remotely is just another opportunity to show that you can adapt to any situation, stay responsive and keep your team moving forward.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to partner? [Bart Williams](#), partner in litigation and managing partner of the firm's Los Angeles office. Bart is an exceptional trial lawyer and, somehow, an even more exceptional mentor. When I was a senior associate, Bart called me into his office and asked, "What kind of leader do you want to be?" That was a pretty heavy question, but one that caused tremendous introspection and change in the way I viewed my responsibility and goals as a growing lawyer. Bart is a true leader; he practices with

honor, honesty and, above all, selflessness. Every win is a team win; every loss is an opportunity for the team to learn. He instilled in me the very sincere belief that this profession must grow—every year, every decade and every generation. So when I retire, decades from now, I hope that there are lawyers out there who will make it their mission to help the next evolution, just as Bart helped me and I helped them.

What advice you could give an associate who wants to make partner? Find yourself—but don't lose yourself—in this great profession. Burnout is real. There are many days where I cannot believe I get paid to do this, but there are some days where I want to throw in the towel. Not a lot, but they happen. And that's OK, because if you're at a place that has your back, and your colleagues are the folks who you call friends and family, you'll get through it together and stronger.

What challenges, if any, did you face or had to overcome in your career path and what was the lesson learned? How did it affect or influence your career? I am a relatively young, LGBT attorney from the South. I can't tell you how many meetings or work events I've been



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to where I am the only woman or the only woman of color or the only woman of color who is also LGBT. We need more first chair trial lawyers who reflect not just the jury demographic but the real world at large. In one of my first trials, a lawyer from the other side just assumed I was a secretary and asked me to take notes during an argument. In another case, a lawyer asked me if I spoke English. Those moments affected and stayed with me, because nothing fuels motivation like the status quo.

What lessons, if any, did you learn in 2020/2021 (the years of COVID-19)? The importance of fundamentals. Thinking on your feet, seeing around corners—regardless of whether you are in court or over Zoom. If you are banking on technology to work (an exhibit to pop up, a video to play, etc.) and it doesn't happen, what's your next move? Flounder or look like your Plan B was Plan A all along? Knowing the record and the witness down pat transcends technology.

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