Proskauer

Alumni Reflections: Mission, Mentorship and Making Connections with Sesame Workshop's Valerie Mitchell Johnston and Atoyia Harris

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Valerie Mitchell Johnston, Executive Vice President and General Counsel at Sesame Workshop, sat down with Proskauer senior counsel **Atoyia Harris** to reflect on the career choices, mentors and communities that helped shape her path.

Valerie joined Proskauer early in her career with a clear interest in media and entertainment and went on to build a career at the intersection of law, mission-driven work, children's media, culture and strategy. In this conversation, she discusses how Proskauer galvanized an interest in intellectual property and entertainment work, how Sesame Workshop became a professional home and why relationships, sponsorship and thoughtful leadership matter at every stage.

Valerie was recently recognized with the Firm's Black Lawyer Affinity Group (BLAG) Alumni Trailblazer Award.

Finding the Right Fit

Atoyia Harris: You joined Proskauer after starting your career at another firm. Why did you choose Proskauer?

Valerie Mitchell Johnston: I always knew I wanted to work in media and entertainment, but when I was coming out of law school, there were not many opportunities in those areas at law firms. I had spent both of my law school summers in Chicago, where I am from, and did not have much connection to New York. But I had interviewed at Proskauer, met people there and remembered the impression it made.

When I realized my first role was not moving in the direction I wanted, I looked back at Proskauer. I did not work strictly in entertainment and media, but I did get a lot of intellectual property work, which was incredibly helpful and enjoyable.

Atoyia Harris: Any Proskauer work that left a lasting impression?

Valerie Mitchell Johnston: One matter involved a Brazilian client who created beautiful wedding gowns with unique designs and wanted copyright protection. It was amazing to be around fashion icons and to work with partners doing such interesting work. As a corporate associate, much of my work involved M&A and securities, which were entirely new to me. This was work I could understand: protecting something creative and tangible.

> “It can be rare for a junior level lawyer at a large firm to work on matters that are so aligned with who you are as a person.”
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> **Valerie Mitchell Johnston**, Executive Vice President and General Counsel, Sesame Workshop

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The Sesame Calling

Atoyia Harris: After Proskauer, you had two stints at Sesame Workshop. Why Sesame?

Valerie Mitchell Johnston: My interest in media and entertainment work was always there and the intellectual property work I had done at Proskauer helped confirm that was the direction I wanted to pursue. I started looking for opportunities that would bring me closer to that world.

This will date me, but I used the hard-copy alumni books from my law school to find people in industries that interested me. The general counsel at Sesame had gone to Harvard, too, so I reached out.

I did not hear from them for almost a year. In the meantime, I left Proskauer for a tech publishing company. But Sesame was where I wanted to be. I grew up watching Sesame Street, and whenever I saw the characters, I'd think, "Okay, it is meant to be. I am going to get this job."

At Sesame, I feel like I grew up professionally. I learned about nonprofits, media and production - from development to financing, production, distribution and licensing. I believe in the mission, and I am proud to tell people I work there.

From Deal Lawyer to Strategic Advisor

Atoyia Harris: What do you like about your current role?

Valerie Mitchell Johnston: I spent 12 years at Sesame, then went to a private equity-backed children's media company called HIT Entertainment as vice president, legal and business affairs, and to Lincoln Center, and then came back to Sesame as deputy general counsel before becoming general counsel. That broad experience prepared me well, because I knew the industry, the organization, the mission and the people.

Becoming general counsel required a shift. I had to let go of being the day-to-day person on transactions and become more of a thought partner and strategic advisor. You are thinking about where the organization is going, what risks we might not be seeing, how to keep the board informed and how to set the organization up for the long term.

I still like to work on transactions from time to time because it is satisfying to draft something well and see something through from beginning to end. But the general counsel role is different. The work is never really done. It is more strategic, more forward-looking and not something that being good at transactions alone necessarily prepares you for.

Atoyia Harris: How did Proskauer help prepare you for those in-house challenges?

Valerie Mitchell Johnston: Being at a big law firm like Proskauer taught me to be thoughtful and careful and committed to excellence. You learn, for example, that defined terms need to match, that the document needs to be proofread and that details matter.

In-house, you sometimes hear, “do not let the perfect be the enemy of the good,” and you really don’t always have time to make everything perfect. But if you have that big-firm training, you learn to do excellent work quickly. I also appreciated having worked for a for-profit company, because it reinforced that even in a nonprofit, the deals still need to make sense for the organization.

Mentorship, Sponsorship and Being Seen

Atoyia Harris: You have been intentional about seeking mentors and sponsors. Why is that important?

Valerie Mitchell Johnston: Mentorship and sponsorship are critical for anyone, but especially if you are in an organization where you are part of a visible minority. It can feel isolating if there are not many people who look like you. Having people you can talk to, people who will be honest with you and people who will use their credibility to open doors is essential.

I do not have any illusion that I would be where I am now without a strong mentor and sponsor. The general counsel at HIT Entertainment later became general counsel at Sesame and recruited me. Having someone so respected believe in your talent, tell other people about it, give you opportunities and call you out when things do not go well can make all the difference.

For a long time, I thought that if I kept my head down, worked hard and produced excellent work, people would notice. That is only partly true. You must do good work, but people may not notice unless someone with credibility notices you first and unless you are intentional about making connections.

Earlier in my career, I received feedback that people knew I was smart and hardworking but did not necessarily see me as a leader. That was important to hear. It made me think differently about relationships, visibility and what it means to create opportunities for yourself.

That is also why I am grateful for opportunities to reconnect with Proskauer and pay it forward, whether by mentoring, interviewing or simply being available to someone who wants advice.

“You have to do good work, but people may not notice unless someone with credibility notices you.”

Valerie Mitchell Johnston, Executive Vice President and General Counsel, Sesame Workshop

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Staying True to the Mission

Atoyia Harris: You have also talked about mission and culture at Sesame. How does that show up in your work now?

Valerie Mitchell Johnston: Our marketing and communications team thinks hard about where Sesame should show up. We are a mission-driven company. Our mission is to help children grow smarter, stronger and kinder. But part of implementing that mission means staying visible in the culture, so parents, adult fans and supporters are thinking about us and our work.

The World Cup Final halftime show was a perfect example. To see Elmo, Cookie Monster, Count von Count and other beloved characters show up on one of the world's biggest stages, alongside global music, a children's chorus and a celebration built around unity, was a reminder of what Sesame can do culturally.

For legal, the question is how we serve as a great partner to our colleagues while being mindful of risk, protecting our intellectual property and staying true to our mission. My team handled the transaction and related arrangements that made the World Cup moment possible. Not everything we do is that visible, but we get to support those moments too - and we get to work for an organization we are proud of.

That mission also shows up in the way people treat each other. We all believe in the organization, and that passion runs through the culture. People care about each other and want each other to have a good experience. That starts from the top. Our chief executive officer is very mindful of people, and I try to model that behavior too.

I want people on my team to learn, grow and work in areas they care about. There will always be work that is necessary but not particularly glamorous. But that is part of the job, because we also get the World Cup moments.

Atoyia Harris: Any final message for the Proskauer alumni community?

Valerie Mitchell Johnston: I am grateful for the chance to reconnect with the Firm and with other alumni. I also want to sing the praises of Proskauer for being mindful of these communities and creating opportunities for current lawyers and alumni to make connections.

That sense of belonging and access to people who can help explain things, support growth and show the way forward is incredibly important. If people feel like they belong in a space and have the connections to help them move from point A to point B, who knows how far they will go.