

Laurie N. Robinson, Esq.

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Blessed are the toilers, some say, especially those who are able to put their own feet to their faith and bring their dreams to life.

Count Laurie Nicole Robinson, Esq., among those who put their feet to their faith. Vice president and assistant general counsel of CBS Corp. in New York City, she has little patience for "visionaries and pontificators" who, rather than execute, leave their dreams to die on the proverbial vine. "I'm not at the

mercy of someone else," she says, adding that she'd rather lead by example than preach.

At CBS, Robinson oversees the legal department's special projects, interfaces with the various legal divisions and facilitates training. Her legal responsibilities extend to the more than 150 CBS radio and television stations nationwide. She attacks her assignments with such enthusiasm and aplomb that she caught the attention of Louis J. Briskman, the company's executive vice president and general counsel. In 2005, three years after Robinson joined CBS as assistant general counsel and director of training and development at CBS Broadcasting Inc., a subsidiary, Briskman promoted her to her current position.

"She's an obviously talented young individual, which is why I promoted her," says Briskman, to whom Robinson now reports.

"Laurie is able to cut through the 'corporate speak' at a meeting of 150 executives within CBS and tell them how we do things in the company the right way as opposed to the wrong way by using humor and song," Briskman says. "She has quoted and sung Aretha Franklin songs, saying that we will have to show people in our company 'respect,' so we will not be a 'chain of fools.'" Law has not escaped the sting of today's harsh economic environment. With the flow of clients and billable hours drying up since the national economy slid into recession in 2007, corporations no longer send work to outside law firms, choosing instead to rely on their in-house attorneys, or general counsels. To further offset costs, law firms have slashed the number of law-school graduates they hire, and either reduced the pay of current associates or encouraged them to take sabbaticals. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 12,900 fewer jobs in legal services in January 2009 than in

January 2008, evidence that law firms are shedding staff in such underperforming practice areas as real estate, finance and mergers and acquisitions. These, however, are the same practice areas with the highest concentration of women and minority attorneys.

A staunch advocate of diversity, Robinson openly criticizes these diversity cuts, arguing that corporate social responsibility is being sacrificed in the interest of fiscal expediency.

Her passion for the law was inspired by her father, James Robinson, a labor and employment attorney in Washington, D.C. "I started out filing paperwork in my father's law practice. And I was underpaid for it, too," says Robinson, smiling at the recollection. Today, at 36, she knows the value of work and her worth. "I am a toiler at heart and I get my satisfaction from being able to complete tasks," she explains. "While the other little kids were playing or riding bikes, I was the kid raking the leaves in the yard and had ten bags of leaves to show for it."

Even so, her childhood in Ft. Washington, Md., and her attendance at North Carolina Central University, a historically Black college and university in Durham, N.C., provided a safe cocoon from which she flourished. She was named Miss North Carolina Central University and served as campus leader to the Durham community.

After graduating from college magna cum laude, she received a law degree in 1998 from Indiana University School of Law at Bloomington and landed an internship at the National Football League in New York, far away from her safe cocoon. "I was accustomed to being in the majority and it felt strange to be in an environment that didn't have a lot of minorities," Robinson says. Instinctively, she knew that, as a woman of color, she should never depend on corporate largesse to move her career forward. Armed with that knowledge, she became a master networker.

In 2003, she joined an informal gathering of female attorneys who would get together at a local New York City restaurant to socialize and to support each other. The group inspired Robinson to create the Corporate Counsel Women of Color (CCWC) in 2004 for women attorneys of color who work primarily at Fortune 1000 and Forbes 2000 legal departments. "Women of color have struggled all around the globe. We all want to have our full potential recognized, utilized and valued," she explains. "We [CCWC] focus on the individual's growth and development, and the big payoff is in our being able to invest in one another."

Commenting on Robinson's role in CCWC, Susan K. Anderson, vice president, assistant general counsel at CBS Broadcasting Inc., says: "It's incredible how this organization has grown under Laurie's leadership to now number over 2,400 members, and how far-reaching its impact. Her organizational skills are admirable."

Robinson's vision for CCWC has always been global. Annual conferences are held in the U.S. and overseas — in England and South Africa to date, and in Singapore in 2010. It helps that CCWC has a steady stream of committed corporate sponsors, including CBS itself, which has supported the organization since 2006.

"Laurie has a way of putting on an event that is all-around top-notch," says Tatia L. Williams, vice president of business affairs at the National Basketball Association, who has helped Robinson on CCWC projects. "She executes on her vision like no one else."

Robinson hopes to empower CCWC members through networking opportunities, workshops on achieving work-life balance and training sessions on board-of-directors memberships at for-profit and nonprofit organizations alike. "When you sit on a corporate board, you're not a worker, but you have a voice in how the company should operate as a business. This way, you have a strong say in how to diversify that workplace," she explains. "I am proud of our members because they are not waiting for Corporate America to get with the program."

Plans for CCWC include creating social-networking capabilities on its Web site, www.ccwomenofcolor.org, and conducting groundbreaking studies about women attorneys of color in corporate legal departments.

Robinson says she has learned two important lessons on the road to becoming a veritable duchess of diversity: the power of patience and the importance of pacing oneself. "Although we want everything now, sometimes you have to let things run their course," she says. "You can't do everything at once. So take on different things when the time is right."

CCWC's reputation is firmly established among her constituency, so attracting top-notch speakers to its events is never a problem. "I call them and they say 'yes,'" Robinson declares.

Asked if she would invite newly appointed Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor to be a speaker, she nods vigorously. Clearly, the idea is appealing. "There is no vision or idea that I cannot execute on myself. I love to see the fruit of my labor," she says. Such is the power of the toiler.