

## **TRAILBLAZER SPOTLIGHT: MICHELE COLEMAN MAYES**

By Deborah W. Yue

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Michele Coleman Mayes knew she wanted to be a lawyer when she was 11 years old. Although she grew up surrounded by medical professionals, she watched Perry Mason and wanted to be just like him, a litigator who always won. She received her bachelor's degree and Juris Doctor from the University of Michigan.

Ms. Mayes worked as an Assistant United States Attorney for 5 ½ years and became the Chief of the Civil Division in Detroit. By the early 1980's, Ms. Mayes reached a crossroad and decided to interview with some of the top law firms in Detroit. When she did not receive an offer, Ms. Mayes decided to explore going in-house. She received an offer to be the Managing Attorney for the Burroughs Corporation. At Burroughs, Ms. Mayes enjoyed handling many high stakes cases for the company. When Burroughs merged with Sperry Corporation in 1986 and eventually became Unisys, Ms. Mayes was appointed Staff Vice President and Associate General Counsel for Worldwide Litigation. At Unisys, Ms. Mayes handled a wide variety of litigation, including patent cases, shareholder derivative suits, fraud cases, and Exxon Valdez related claims. She describes her time at Unisys as "an unbelievable experience for a litigator!"

One evening at Unisys, one of the few women senior executives at the company stopped Ms. Mayes and asked her what her plans were. Ms. Mayes explained that her plan was to go home. Of course, the senior executive was asking about her career plans and not her destination that evening. Ms. Mayes had not known this executive well and was a little baffled by the question. It was that executive's questions that led Ms. Mayes to explore becoming a general counsel and seeing herself in that role. That senior executive became Ms. Mayes' first formal mentor in the corporate sector and remains a friend to this day. After this discussion, Ms. Mayes went to her general counsel, Andrew Hendry, and asked him how she could be like him. Ms. Mayes laughs as she recalls that Mr. Hendry gave her a long list of skills that she lacked in order to become a general counsel. Unfazed, Ms. Mayes asked how she could obtain that experience. She did not immediately receive a satisfactory response.

When Mr. Hendry left Unisys in early 1991, Ms. Mayes wrote a memo indicating an interest in the now vacate general counsel position. Although Unisys hired someone else for the position, Ms. Mayes was determined to be a general counsel.

In 1991, her former boss, Andrew Hendry, called her out of the blue to suggest a meeting. At that meeting, Mr. Hendry asked if she would consider interviewing for a position with Colgate, where he was the general counsel. Ms. Mayes, in her usual direct manner, asked why she would make the move to Colgate since he already had the job that she wanted. Mr. Hendry told her that if she came, he would help her gain the experience that she

needed to become a general counsel. Mr. Hendry kept his word. In 1992, Ms. Mayes joined Colgate-Palmolive as Vice President and Associate General Counsel. She quickly rose through the ranks holding several positions, the last of which was Vice President, Legal and Assistant Secretary and elected a Corporate Officer. Although she and Mr. Hendry did not always agree and debated quite often, she learned the value of truly embracing diversity, not only of race and gender but also diversity of opinion. Ms. Mayes readily states that she learned a great deal from him as a role model and mentor.

In 2003, Ms. Mayes went to Pitney Bowes as the Senior Vice President and General Counsel. In 2007, she was named Senior Vice President and General Counsel for Allstate Insurance Company.

Ms. Mayes received the 2003 Margaret Brent Award from the American Bar Association Commission on women in the Profession and the Trailblazers Award from the Minority Corporate Counsel Association. She was also named as one of America's top African-American lawyers. This year, she was recognized as one of the most influential General Counsels in America by *The National Law Journal*.

Ms. Mayes has always been outspoken and direct. She encourages young women attorneys to have the courage to speak what they believe is their truth. She further emphasizes that it is important to stand for something.

She also emphasizes that sometimes you need to look for opportunities and other times, opportunity comes to you. She credits her regular attendance at a women's networking event with helping the Pitney Bowes opportunity find her. Through the networking events, she came to know the then general counsel at Pitney Bowes, Sara Moss. When that general counsel resigned her position, she created a slate for the CEO to consider and Ms. Mayes was at the top of that short list.

When asked what advice she would give to women lawyers – indeed, all women, Ms. Mayes gave the following list of 5 rules (some which are shamelessly borrowed from Veta Richardson, the Executive Director of the Minority Corporate Counsel Association):

1. Take stock: know yourself, what matters to you and why.
2. Take credit: although many people believe that who you know is important, it is equally as important for others to know you and your accomplishments.
3. Take risks: it is important to be bold and to take risks. If you fail, learn and move on.
4. Take a stand: Be passionate. Have courage. Accept that taking a stand may not always be comfortable.
5. Take a hand: It is important to not only grab the hand given but also to reach back and to give a hand. Mentoring is essential. Pay it forward.

Ms. Mayes emphasizes that it is not good enough to be the first or only woman. Trailblazers need to help others who follow in their footsteps. When adjectives like “first” or “only” become extraneous, then we will know we have made visible progress.

Deborah Yue is a member of the TIPS Diversity in the Profession committee. She is a partner in the law firm of Gallagher Sharp and concentrates her practice on insurance and general liability litigation. She also counsels insurance clients and claims personnel on coverage issues, claims practices and the avoidance of bad faith. Gallagher Sharp is a trial and business practice firm focused on the defense of civil claims and lawsuits for corporations, insurance companies and their policyholders. Ms. Yue can be reached at [dyue@gallaghersharp.com](mailto:dyue@gallaghersharp.com).

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