

McDermott Partner Recounts His Firsts as a Sikh Lawyer and the Wave of Diversity in the Profession

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BY AMANDEEP S. SIDHU

I was recently reminded of a pivotal moment in my life, when, in January, I returned to my Richmond, Virginia high school for a celebration recognizing my team's 1995 basketball tournament victory, the first such win for the school.

You see, I was the first observant Sikh to attend my high school. With my unshorn hair, long beard, and brightly colored turbans, I flipped the Collegiate School's traditional dress code on its head. My diversity unmasked, I had no choice but to use it as an opportunity to educate my peers—both on and off the court.

Being the first Sikh at Collegiate was a harbinger of "firsts" ahead of me, a path charted by my parents when they came to Virginia 42 years ago. I was the first turbaned Sikh to attend the University of Richmond School of Law—where I was elected president of the Student Bar Association and student speaker at graduation. I was the first Sikh summer clerk at the Supreme Court of Virginia. Then, I became the first Sikh judicial clerk at the Court of Appeals of Virginia.

When I joined McDermott Will & Emery in 2007, I became the first turbaned Sikh there. Later, when I made partner in 2013, I became the first turbaned Sikh to achieve that recognition at an AmLaw 100 firm *ever*. Let that sink in. While Sikhs have been in the United States since the late 1800s, I could count on two hands the number of Sikh lawyers I knew growing up.



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Only a small handful ended up in Big Law. Just as other lawyers of color faced challenges before me, getting to this level has not been easy and did not happen by chance. It's taken a personal commitment and willingness to work twice as hard as my nondiverse peers, mentors to guide me and sponsors who put their credibility on the line to support my success.

As I now mentor other lawyers of color, I am heartened that corporations are embracing the importance of both diversity *and* inclusion. As Vernā Myers said, "Diversity is being invited to the party, inclusion is being asked to dance." When I look back on my journey, I could easily have ended up as the token nod to diversity at each step along the way. Instead, I was

included—whether by invitation or, more often, through my own personal advocacy—to ensure that I had equal opportunities to excel. Unable to “cover” my very visible religious identity (a term coined by professor Kenji Yoshino in “Covering: The Hidden Assault on our Civil Rights”), I chose to be my “authentic self” (as explained by Ritu Bhasin in “The Authenticity Principle”) and use my diversity as a strength, not a hindrance.

We are undoubtedly at an inflection point in the movement towards greater D&I across the corporate world. When Mastercard named Ajay Banga its president and CEO in 2010, he was the first turbaned Sikh to lead a Fortune 500 company. Banga’s appointment sent the clear message that religious identity does not create an unbreakable glass ceiling, and he uses his position to give voice to the importance of D&I in the corporate world:

“Diversity and inclusion cannot be a nice-to-have. Rather, it must be expected, not simply accepted. The results of this prioritization are clear—better insights, better decisions and better products that differentiate a company from the competition,” Banga said.

Nearly a decade later, research (including McKinsey’s 2018 “Delivering Through Diversity” report) continues to reinforce the link between diversity and corporate financial performance. Legal departments are increasingly demanding that outside counsel have robust D&I programs and staff cases with diverse lawyers in significant leadership roles.

The excitement about D&I has also been front and center in Hollywood. At the 2018 Academy Awards, Jordan Peele made history as the first black writer to win an Oscar for best original screenplay in the Academy’s 90-year history. The Academy also featured a segment focused on the importance of representation, where Pakistani-American actor Kumail Nanjiani made the witty but poignant observation:

“Some of my favorite movies are movies by straight white dudes about straight white dudes. Now straight white dudes can watch movies starring me, and you relate to that. It’s not that hard. I’ve been doing it my whole life.”

Perhaps the most powerful moment of the night was when Frances McDormand asked all of the women nominated for awards to stand up. What a feeling that must have been for all of the women who have faced tremendous challenges to achieve greatness in their field—particularly in the wake of the hostility, harassment and violence that finally has the voice it deserves in the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements.

But tucked at the end of McDormand’s speech were two words that made my ears perk up: *inclusion rider*. The term was immediately trending and continues to generate buzz. Inclusion riders are a thoughtful, deliberate approach to increase diversity in an industry that has slowly evolved to “reflect the world in which we actually live.”

Inclusion Riders are the latest evolution of the National Football League’s “Rooney Rule” and the current “Mansfield Rule” effort led by 44 law firms (including McDermott) and Diversity Lab. Firms that sign on to the Mansfield Rule certify that they will consider at least 30 percent women and minority lawyers for significant leadership roles—including promotions to equity partner, lateral searches, prominent committee membership and leadership.

Narrated by my own personal experience, I am optimistic about what lies ahead as we write the next chapter in the history of the legal profession in the United States.

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