

LAWDRAGON

Black Brilliance: How Latham & Watkins Built an Extraordinary Network of Top Black Lawyers



Members of The Black Lawyers Group at Latham & Watkins (L to R): Oswald Cousins, Nathan Davis, Monica White, Kem Ihenacho, Brian Patterson, David Ziyambi, Sarah Fortt, Linzi Thomas, Marissa Alter-Nelson, BJ Trach, Danielle Conley, Nicole Fanjul, Damara Chambers, Laura Washington, Jennifer Kent, Joe Alexander, Kevin Chambers, Kirsten Jackson, Kim Boras and Clement Fondufe.

By Katrina Dewey

In March 2023, a remarkable group of Latham & Watkins lawyers gathered in London for a photo. The individuals were all part of the firm's Black Lawyers Group, and all partners at the firm. Many had worked together in various ways over many years, others were new to the firm or new to the partnership. For some, it would be the first time they had joined so many other Black partners in a single room.

This powerful network of brilliant Black lawyers within Latham & Watkins – itself a powerful global network of lawyers – brought together people from across the globe, from many

backgrounds, and from a whole spectrum of practice areas through which they handle some of the legal industry's most sophisticated matters and contribute to one of the world's most impactful legal communities.

Understanding the conditions that made this photo possible requires an understanding of what makes Latham tick. Years ago, the firm's then-managing partner Bob Dell articulated the firm's aspiration: "To be the best global law firm, consistent with our culture." Latham's culture – with hallmarks of collaboration, participation, mentoring and excellence – has created the conditions for success for many lawyers from many different backgrounds, including for many Black lawyers.

Several of Latham's Black partners illustrate how these aspects of Latham culture have allowed them to flourish in their careers.

BJ Trach, a white collar and complex commercial litigator in Boston, joined the firm in 2012 because of Latham's stature in the legal market.

"There was this handful of firms that were separating themselves from the pack," says Trach, who graduated from Harvard Law School in 2004, clerked for First Circuit Court of Appeals Justice Sandra Lynch, and practiced at another firm prior to and then after joining the U.S. Attorney's Office in Boston.

"The chance to be at this place that was really elite was something that was just impossible to pass up," he says.

When he returned to Big Law from his role as a prosecutor in the U.S. Attorney's Office, he was undeterred by the scarcity of other Black attorneys back then. Which is not to say he didn't notice. So, not long after he arrived at Latham, he helped develop the firm's efforts to advance diversity within the firm.

True to form at Latham, the diversity strategy came from the ground up. For instance, Trach and colleagues advocated that the firm create a "Diversity Leadership Committee," rather than establish a "Diversity Committee." The subtle but important difference? The Diversity Leadership Committee (DLC) would not be solely responsible for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), but would help set strategy, as indicated by the word *leadership*. And the strategy would impact a broad cross section of the firm – created not just for those who identify as members of traditionally underrepresented groups, but for everyone, for the community. And importantly, the committee would involve the participation of senior leadership, signaling that everyone at the firm has a role to play in advancing diversity.

Trach served on the DLC for several years, became the chair, and then was elected to Latham's governing nine-member Executive Committee.

The DLC model mirrored another innovative and effective committee at Latham – the longstanding Associates Committee. Rare in the industry, Latham's Associates Committee,

composed of both associates *and* partners, determines progression after robust and honest discussion among the group. Like other committees, the firm's Associates Committee model helps foster trust and collaboration, which the firm views as a foundation for its success.

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Trach explains that, like the Associates Committee, “the idea was that we were not going to be solely responsible for diversity at Latham. We were going to spearhead the firm’s DEI strategy and work with all partners to strengthen and promote Latham as a workplace where the best and brightest professionals – including those underrepresented in the legal industry – could excel and find support to become firm and industry leaders.”

The DLC’s work within the firm helped to create excellent conditions for recruiting. Latham’s recruiting team, well-aware that the firm attracts the best and the brightest, regularly reaches out into the market – sometimes with uncanny timing – to initiate discussions with potential laterals.

Sarah Fortt, one of the Global Co-Chairs of Latham’s ESG Practice, illustrates the point. Fortt graduated from Yale Law School in 2010. Coming from a family where the ministry was far more expected than the law, she found herself at law school and then in private practice somewhat unexpectedly. “I had always expected and wanted a quiet life, but my first years of practice lit a fire in me to fight for opportunities for those behind me. It was and is,” she says, “a different kind of ministry, but still a vocation.”

Finding her voice as a corporate governance lawyer, her formative years as a Black lawyer in powerhouse law firms coincided with the birth of the ESG movement, which built on core debates within her field of corporate governance. “Corporations are fundamentally human communities. The desire to tell their collective story was immediately appealing to me,” she says.

Building one of the first ESG legal practices in the U.S., she drew on her experience and expertise in corporate governance, compliance and disclosure, becoming a top boardroom advisor on issues ranging from climate change to shareholder activism and crisis management. In 2021, after more than a decade in Big Law, she indicated in a conversation with a friend who was a legal recruiter that there was only one law firm she would consider making a move for: Latham. While they were speaking, another call came in and went to voicemail. When Fortt hung up and checked the message, she realized the call had come from a Latham recruiter.

“There have been a few critical moments in my life of true kismet, and that was definitely one of them.”

Fortt joined Latham in January 2022.

“I think the Latham platform is undisputedly the greatest legal platform in the world.” Fortt cites three reasons: unparalleled quality of work, breadth of client representation, and the level of excellence across numerous areas of practice.

“Latham doesn’t just excel in two or three practices; it’s excellent across them all,” she says on that last point. “That is critical for any ESG leader. I am not in one practice area; collaboration is at the heart of what I do.”

Complementing her leadership role within the ESG practice, Fortt continues to find ways to support her communities within and outside of the firm, including by serving on the firm’s Pro Bono Committee and a number of prestigious advisory boards in her practice area. Like the firm’s other committees, the Pro Bono Committee consists of partners, counsel and associates, and drives the direction of the firm’s award-winning pro bono program, which takes on matters in nearly every area of public interest law.

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While Trach and Fortt joined Latham well into their careers, other exceptional Black partners – like many of Latham’s other market-leading partners – have built their entire careers at the firm.

Nicole Fanjul started at Latham as an associate in 2009. Now she is the Co-Deputy Office Managing Partner of the firm’s largest office (New York) and advises market leading financial institutions on loan transactions. None of this was an obvious trajectory to her growing up in Westchester, N.Y. Her mom was a nurse, and her dad was from Virginia farming country, moving north and working as a systems analyst while running his own landscaping business on the side.

During her college years studying psychology at Duke University, a member of Fanjul’s family encountered the criminal justice system. This experience radically changed Fanjul’s focus as she and her family struggled to understand what was happening.

“I felt a complete powerlessness at this mass institution, these wheels churning, and people saying things in a room where you don’t know what’s happening. And then, all of a sudden, there’s an impact to your life and you just have to deal with it forever,” she says. The feeling of being ill-equipped and powerless focused her on the legal system and the “laws that govern everything we do, every aspect of our society and our lives, whether we realize it or not.”

She went on to Harvard Law School and joined Latham in 2009 straight out of law school. From the beginning, she was particularly drawn to Latham’s unassigned program for new associates, through which associates are given the opportunity to take on work from different practices. She gravitated to transactional work because she “likes to find solutions where all sides are

happy with the outcome.” A middle child, she’s a born mediator. She found her professional home in the bank finance group.

She joined thinking she would stay four years, tops, with no clear idea what she would do after that. “I think part of it is being a Black woman, and a first-generation professional. Big Law just didn’t feel like a world where I was going to thrive for the long term,” she says. But she wanted to get training, pay off her loans and be financially stable in the process. As a fourth-year associate, she was asked to join the firm’s Training and Career Enhancement Committee, and later served on the Associates Committee. As a mid-level associate, she met with senior leaders of the firm – including the managing partner who asked how he could be supportive. Then she was asked to be a leader in the New York office for the Black Lawyers Group. She came to understand “how much the firm really was sincere about all the things that they said were important, in terms of values, the focus on inclusion, and efforts in terms of DEI initiatives.”

More recently, she was tapped to become a Deputy Office Managing Partner of the firm’s New York office. “I look sometimes at where I am and what I’m doing, and I’m like, ‘How did I get here?’” She is particularly touched when junior associates reach out to say it makes a difference to see someone like her in leadership.

“At Latham, we say, ‘Belong as you are.’ This is very big to me, and that’s one of the things I’m most proud of about Latham’s focus,” Fanjul says. “You don’t have to be anything other than who you are. Be yourself at work. This job is very demanding, and I don’t have extra energy to try to pretend to be someone I’m not. I need to come in here, be who I am, say what I think. I felt that was always well-received, well-respected, and I was rewarded for that, in terms of being able to progress, being my authentic self here, I think that’s really incredible.”

The Latham culture that Fanjul thinks is incredible extends beyond New York, and even beyond the U.S. into all of Latham’s global offices.

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Kem Ihenacho – who serves and has served in numerous leadership roles including as a current member of the firm’s Executive Committee, recent Chair of Latham’s Diversity Leadership Committee, current Global Vice Chair of Latham’s Africa Practice, and previously Global Vice Chair of the Private Equity & Investment Funds Practice – underscores the importance of the firm’s culture from his perspective in the London office.

Unlike others, who may not have envisioned a career in the law, Ihenacho had long heard from his Nigeria relatives that there were only three career choices available to him: doctor, engineer or lawyer. Ihenacho was raised by his cardiologist father and British nurse mother in Nigeria, Palo Alto, and the UK.

Social and criminal justice issues were major themes in the late ‘80s and ‘90s as the teenage Ihenacho moved from Nigeria to the UK for high school. Police brutality and oppressive

treatment of minorities inspired him to study law at Cardiff University. He adapted to a more commercial track to win the training contract needed to qualify as a solicitor.

Right away, Ihenacho was taken with dealmaking at the firm he joined. Under the tutelage of a respected partner, his education was accelerated by the departure of the senior associate. In short order, Ihenacho learned how to win business, build client relationships and help clients achieve their business objectives. He had built a successful practice in private equity and made partner at a prior firm, when approached by Latham as it continued to invest in Europe.

What he found was that Latham offered a truly global platform and a commitment to its “one firm” ethos. Importantly, the appeal of Latham’s burgeoning global dealmaking platform was massive. And, says Ihenacho, “if I’m being completely honest, whilst I was encouraged by the other Black partners at the firm, my main concerns were, ‘What’s the overall culture of the firm? Is it one that I’m going to thrive in, going to be supported with what I need to transition my clients and to build a business collaboratively with my partners?’ Those concerns were quickly allayed.”

He joined Latham in 2012. “My immediate observation was there was a real focus on inclusion from the top of the firm. The infrastructure that had been built around that seemed very advanced to me and complementary to the goal of advancing diversity,” he says. “It’s easily the best career decision I made. I feel very proud and humbled, candidly, to be part of this business and this enterprise that we’re all building.”

Ihenacho represents many of the top players in private equity in a range of sophisticated and substantial investments and deals. And as a leader of the DLC, he played a leading role in ensuring a place for other Black and other underrepresented lawyers at the firm. He describes his approach simply: “I want to make sure that a young me knows that they have a place here, that they belong in the room and as part of the conversation.”

“It’s key to make sure that connectivity for our members is there, and the doors stay open to be able to access resources to learn and develop your expertise.”

One such lawyer is Linzi Thomas. Thomas joined Latham as a private equity associate when Ihenacho came to the firm. Thomas became a partner at Latham in 2019. “Latham has really high standards about quality,” says Thomas. “But an incredible openness to the reality that quality comes from all different kinds of backgrounds.”

Thomas’ grandparents migrated to London from Jamaica in the 1970s, just after the Windrush Generation.

Her dad, a sound engineer, and her primary school teacher mother instilled in Thomas the importance of finding her voice and being independent. This independence taught her to make sensible decisions about education. Thomas believed, “I could do anything I set my mind to.”

She researched and won admittance to an elite all-girls senior school and listened in as her classmates talked about their hoped-for careers. Her ears perked up as they talked about something called a corporate lawyer. “I became a lawyer because I met a young lady who inspired me. I wanted to be like her. And that’s why I think representation matters. If you can’t see it, you don’t know that you can do it.”

After graduating from King’s College London, she won her choice of so-called “vacation scheme” internships in corporate law at three of the five Magic Circle firms. She chose the firm where Ihenacho was a partner. She was entering her two-year training period in 2009 amidst the global financial crisis when prospects were tight, so she threw herself at every opportunity knowing only a portion of the roughly 120 trainee lawyers would be kept on. She met Ihenacho and enjoyed working with him, asking to sit in on meetings, and doing everything she could to secure a position in his firm’s Private Equity team. Six people applied, and two were selected. Including Thomas. “I was over the moon,” she says. “And since then, I haven’t looked back.”

But she has looked around and forward. Thomas recounts how a New York associate, a member of the Black Lawyers Group, reached out to her in London for help getting more meaningful assignments. Thomas connected with a New York partner who has gotten the New York associate involved in new work.

“I am happy to make connections,” she says. “I do it for Black associates, I do it for other associates. But if that New York associate didn’t have that connection with me, through the Black Lawyers Group, and someone she felt she could talk with, she may not have had the confidence to ask for help from someone else,” says Thomas. “It’s key to make sure that connectivity for our members is there, and the doors stay open to be able to access resources to learn and develop your expertise.”

One of the ways that happens is through internal training and networking. The firm has built on a long-standing program of “Academies” held in two-year intervals. More than a decade ago, Latham replicated this successful model with Women’s and Diversity Leadership Academies, which are open to all lawyers, and foster powerful connections for attorneys to tap into a dialogue, build a supportive culture and be able to ask tough questions.

“In this critical mass of peers, you are able to speak to people about the various paths to progression, about how you create the circumstances for promotion at Latham, the things to do and the things to not do,” says Thomas. “Being [from] an underrepresented group, sometimes we find it harder to access that kind of information. And that is the key. It’s being able to have those conversations.”

From laterals to Latham lifers, from both sides of the Atlantic, the network of brilliant Black lawyers extends into all practice areas at Latham.

Brian Patterson, a lawyer who has developed a successful career as a Silicon Valley dealmaker, in an environment where Black lawyers are unusual, joined Latham in 2023, attracted to the firm's unsurpassed breadth.

“Representation matters. If you can't see it, you don't know that you can do it.

“I had a general understanding of the law firm landscape and where Latham sits in it,” he says. “And seeing that there were Black attorneys at Latham that had risen to that level at such a firm, that's all I needed to hear or see.” Patterson met Trach and Ihenacho during his recruitment. “I wanted to lock arms and work alongside them, learn from and uplift one another.”

As a dealmaker, he was also plugging into a booming platform that had broken through the market in Silicon Valley. “The opportunity to leverage the depth and breadth of what Latham offers on a global scale, including practice areas that complement my broader network, was just something I couldn't pass up. We are able to excel at representing the early stage start-up or emerging manager investment fund to the world's largest multinational organizations. No matter is ever too complex and our clients will never outgrow us,” he says. He joined in February 2023 and serves as Global Vice Chair of Emerging Companies and Growth.

And so, Latham's network of brilliant Black partners grows, most recently attracting Danielle Conley. She was serving as a Deputy White House counsel, when on February 25, 2022, President Joe Biden kept his promise to nominate a Black woman to the U.S. Supreme Court. And not just any woman.

“He nominated the smartest, most wonderful woman for the position,” says Danielle Conley, who was a part of the core team charged with shepherding the confirmation of Ketanji Brown Jackson.

Conley earned her law degree from Howard University School of Law in 2003, a school with a rich civil rights history that counts Justice Thurgood Marshall among its alumni. Before her role in the White House, she spent time in private practice and at the Department of Justice, serving as a deputy to Sally Yates.

Conley helped prep Brown Jackson for her hearings to become the nation's third Black justice, following Thurgood Marshall and Clarence Thomas. And on April 7, 2022, Conley reveled as someone who looked like her, and her daughters, was confirmed as an Associate Justice on the nation's highest court.

That historic moment marked Conley's time to return to private practice. After 18 months leading the White House Counsel team dedicated to civil rights, democracy and equity issues, she had her pick of law firms. She knew that she wanted to join a firm that would embrace her commitment to equity and where there was a strong representation of Black lawyers.

One firm in particular kept crossing her radar: Latham. It was different, former colleagues and friends told her, offering a partnership with extraordinarily accomplished and talented lawyers, including a strong community of Black lawyers who help each other. Whose presence and voices coalesced in a growing force in the powerhouse firm. She joined the firm as a partner in October 2022, where she now leads the Anti-Discrimination and Civil Rights practice.

“It is about so much more than numbers. It is about how people are represented within the organization, whether their voices are heard and whether they count,” says Conley. And, as the March 2023 photo of Latham’s Black partners demonstrated, the voices of Black lawyers can be heard at Latham. And they are multiplying.



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