

# GEN

A  
Q & A  
with Three  
Attorneys

**MARGO BROWNELL, VAISHALI RAO,  
AND KYLE EVANS GAY**

# ERATIONAL DIVIDES

*Why did you go to law school?*

**Kyle Gay (KG):** I went to law school because I believed that a law degree would provide me with excellent training for many potential careers. Mentors told me that in law school I would learn how to think differently and creatively about problem solving. I believed that these and other skills would be broadly applicable in many fields and would empower me to be creative in crafting my own unique career path either inside or outside the practice of law.

**Margo Brownell (MB):** I had been a journalist for several years prior to going to law school, and while I enjoyed that career, I knew my calling was to be an advocate rather than a journalist. I wanted to learn the skills that would enable me to help people and businesses navigate legal complexities and obtain just results, and I was drawn to the intellectual challenge of law school and the legal profession.

*(To MB) How did being in the Peace Corps influence you and your career?*

**MB:** I have always had a drive to serve and to address injustices that I see. That impulse led me to sign up for the Peace Corps, where I worked in Morocco with kids who were disabled by polio. That same drive inspired me to become a lawyer because law gives one the skills to make a difference when people face some of life's most difficult situations.

What are the biggest challenges you faced in your first few years of practice?

**Vaishali Rao (VR):** The biggest challenge I faced when first starting out was learning that there is not always a right and wrong answer, but rather, there is good judgment and bad judgment.

**MB:** There were two big ones: gaining confidence I was doing a good job as a lawyer (every lawyer recognizes that “deer in the headlights” look of a new lawyer) and finding work-life balance. When you start practicing, everything is new, takes a long time to figure out, and you worry about whether you are getting it right and doing your job well. Put that on top of the desire to be a good mother and spend time with your kids (I had a third-grader and fifth-grader at the time), and it makes for a stressful combination. Figuring out how to work through all that was very challenging.

(To VR) What influenced your decision to change career tracks from government to law firm?

**VR:** In many respects, I was very happy with my career at the Attorney General's Office. I worked on exceptional cases with extraordinary people—attorneys and non-attorneys alike. But, I think I always knew that at some point I had to spread my wings and challenge myself in different ways. It was a difficult decision to leave, but I have to admit I was excited by the challenge of changing sides. I think learning a different perspective helps you grow as a lawyer, and so does working with new people.

What financial goals did you have early in your career? How have they shifted?

**KG:** Aside from a personal goal of satisfying my law school debt as soon as possible, I was fortunate that my career goals were not tied to finances. At any point in time, I pursued career opportunities that I thought would help me learn and develop as an attorney and that would provide me an opportunity to have a seat at the table. Freedom from financial concerns also enabled me to seek out these opportunities and make career changes based on the work rather than the salary.

Have you ever experienced a workplace conflict that was primarily the result of generational differences (e.g., technology, workplace attire, finances, etc.)?

**KG:** Absolutely. One time when I was on a conference call with an older partner, I was simultaneously reviewing an expedited filing on my phone so that I could provide the paralegal feedback that would move that process forward. The partner assumed I was surfing the internet and shared his dissatisfaction with my behavior with his colleagues. That generational misconception and miscommunication turned into an office-wide discussion about how different generations leverage technology in the workplace.

**VR:** Yes. But it's a fine balance between recognizing that bias exists, but not dwelling in it so much that you create your own obstacles. When I was first starting out, I had my guard up more; I thought no one would take me seriously because of my youth. I spent (or maybe wasted) a lot of time being anxious over it. Over time, I learned that the one thing that transcends generational differences is hard work. I started focusing more on being good at what I do and finding the right people in an organization to support me.

**VAISHALI RAO**  
received her JD in  
2008

**MARGO BROWNELL**  
received her JD in  
2000

*Workplace attire is one common area where generational divides appear.*

*What, in your opinion, is appropriate?*

*What is not?*

**MB:** I am in favor of feeling comfortable at work. I believe that one should be able to “dress for their day,” (i.e., casual dress including jeans) if one will be working at one’s desk and not meeting with clients or in court. I see law firms going that way. When it comes to court, suits are still a must for women (no one wants to run afoul of a judge who insists on jackets in the courtroom). But in mediations and client meetings, it can be appropriate for women to forego a suit for a dress, skirt and sweater set, nice pants and jacket, etc. My basic rule is to look nice and respectful while expressing my own style, but my outfit should never distract or be the object of attention.

**VG:** (1) Dress how you want to be perceived. Your outfit should be an enhancement to your personality and intellect, not a detraction. (2) Dress to bolster your credibility. As a lawyer, all your cues—verbal and nonverbal—should support your position and enhance your case. Attire is one of them. For example, when I worked in consumer protection and had to interview consumer victims, I wouldn’t wear a blazing power suit so that the consumer felt comfortable to talk openly with me. On the flip side, when I negotiated those same matters as the lead negotiator against senior partners at top tier law firms, I dressed up. In those situations, I wanted to be their equal. (3) If you are second guessing, don’t wear it. (4) Ask for another opinion. You may think you know for sure that something is appropriate, but you have no idea how others are perceiving you until you ask. (5) Test what you look like when you sit down.



**KYLE GAY**

*received her JD in  
2012*

**KG:** There is no one definition of appropriate workplace attire. As a litigator, I always wear a suit to any formal proceeding such as a deposition or hearing. But at all other times, even when meeting with clients, I believe business casual is appropriate.

*Which professional values do you prioritize?*

**VR:** Producing valuable and impactful work, honest relationships, and grit.

**MB:** I prioritize honesty and abiding by the highest ethical standards at all times. If that means challenging a client’s position, or admitting a mistake, oversight, or poor decision to a partner, so be it. It is important never to cut corners on being honest and ethical.

**KG:** Honesty, professionalism, and collegiality. I also prioritize service to the bar and to my local community.

*Did having a child change your perspective as a lawyer and change how you work? How so?*

**KG:** Having a child did not change my perspective as a lawyer, my goals for my career, or my drive to achieve professional success. But having a child dramatically changed how and when I work. I used to stay at the office late to get my work done. Now I arrive at work as early as I can after caring for my child in the morning. I also consistently leave work by 6pm at night to spend time with my child before she goes to bed. Then, as soon as she goes to bed, I sign back in to finish my work late at night. The change initially required me to communicate clearly with my colleagues, and it has required continued constant communication around expectations.

*What challenges did you face in balancing work and family and how did you handle it?*

**VR:** Balancing work and family is a challenge every day. I have a three-year-old and a two-year-old, so I don’t have any sage advice. It’s a challenge just getting to work in the morning! I remember when I first had my oldest, I constantly wanted to quit or work part-time. I kept thinking, “this is crazy,” about juggling everything. But a big blessing was that I couldn’t quit for financial reasons. Before I knew it, I had made it through a couple of years of parenting and full-time working. I think everyone achieves some version of balance (if that really is a

thing) in their own way. A big part of it is just being honest about the struggle, asking directly for what you need, talking with other working parents, and constantly reassessing who needs what on a particular day (including me!).

**MB:** As mentioned, it is constantly a challenge to balance the demands of litigation with that of parenting. I dealt with this challenge in several ways over the years. During my third year of practice, I cut down on business travel by switching from the national firm where I started my practice to a regional firm. From my sixth to tenth year, I was part-time (as low as 60 percent time) to get flexibility in my schedule and reduce my billable goal so that I could have more time with my kids.

Throughout my career I have worked from home when necessary (obviously that is much easier now than it was in the old days). Now I am an empty-nester and I am back to full-time and have *too much time* to work! It is important for both law firms and lawyers to understand that everyone's needs and demands change over the years as they raise kids and age, and to retain women (in

particular), firms need to be flexible and take the long view. New lawyers should seek out an employer with policies and a culture that supports families and treats its lawyers holistically (i.e., not only as practitioners but also as parents and well-rounded people with hobbies and outside interests).

*How is your career now different from how you imagined it would be as a fresh attorney?*

**MB:** As a junior associate, I don't think I had a clear idea of how my career would progress and what it would be like to be a senior woman lawyer or even how long I would last in law. There were senior lawyers that I knew I did not want to be like, but I didn't see a clear model of a senior woman partner/litigator to emulate. I think it's an issue for many starting female lawyers. Yet, now I am a senior partner with a practice that I really enjoy (policyholder-side insurance coverage work). I'm bringing in work to the firm, earning a good living, and I am proud to call myself a lawyer. There is no one point of career arrival, but just increased accomplishment that comes by showing up, putting in effort, finding a practice that you enjoy, navigating firm culture by avoiding firm politics and gossip, and trusting your abilities.

*What advice would you give an attorney who is five years or less out of law school?*

**KG:** My advice to young attorneys is to seek out opportunities to build the skills specific to your field or practice area. If you do not have access to those opportunities in your day-to-day practice, then seek out pro bono practice or professional development programs offered by the bar or through national programs. Expect to get pushback on these non-billable activities and be prepared to clearly articulate how these programs will help you develop your practice.

**VR:** Generally, I don't like to give advice to newer attorneys. I prefer to exchange ideas. I find that everyone's journey is unique; newer attorneys are just as smart and capable as seasoned ones, and often have their own perspectives to share with me that equally influence my journey.

However, if I was forced to break my own rule, this is what I would say: First, surround yourself with people who have a passion for the law and their legal careers rather than those who will tell you the negatives (you can figure those parts out on your own). Second, listen so acutely that the silence of your voice is uncomfortable. Third, try new things and take calculated risks—it is called the practice of law for a reason. Fourth, exceptional people who are sincere stand out in any setting. Finally, believe you have what it takes. You need to convince yourself before you can convince anyone else.

**MB:** First, remember that every day is a new dawn—challenges will be overcome, problems solved, mistakes corrected, wisdom gained, and if you stick with your practice, you will be an excellent lawyer and get huge satisfaction out of your career. Second, even if you have no idea how to answer a question, you always can confidently say “let me check on that and get back to you,” and still come off as knowing what you are doing.

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