

How I Made Partner: Ropes & Gray's Melissa Bender

She says her unusual background, including in-house, off-site and Part-time work, has inspired other women.

By Jonathan Ringel

Practice area: Asset management (Hedge funds, private funds, hybrid funds, fund formation, regulatory compliance).

Law school: University of Denver Sturm College of Law, 1999.

How long have you been at the firm? Overall about 17 years. I say “overall” because I started at Ropes & Gray in Boston in 2000. After a few years, I left for an in-house role with a client, rejoining the firm in late 2005. For nearly a decade, I worked remotely as part of a Ropes & Gray attorney offsite program, which allowed me to continue to develop a top legal practice even though I wasn’t living in a major city at the time. Following a move to California in 2013, I returned as an onsite attorney in our San Francisco and Silicon Valley offices.

How long were you an associate at the firm? I was promoted to counsel in 2016 before making partner, so in total I spent 14 years at the firm as an associate.

What year did you make partner at your current firm? 2018.

What’s the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming partner?

What I was not expecting and really surprised me is the reaction I’ve received from other women who have said that my journey to making partner has been inspiring to them. Unlike many of my colleagues and peers, I worked in different practices at the firm, left to go in-house, and then returned. I also worked offsite and part time, and moved geographically. Given that I have such an unusual background, a number of women I work with who are shaping their careers have said it’s been motivating to see my path to success.

This also speaks to the culture of Ropes & Gray: our hedge funds practice was founded by a woman and, with my promotion to partner, eight of the nine partners specializing in hedge funds are women. At Ropes & Gray, women hold significant leadership positions as practice group leaders, department heads, office managing partners and policy committee members. It’s really exciting that Julie Jones was named as our chair, marking the first



courtesy photo

Melissa C. Bender, 46, Ropes & Gray, San Francisco and Silicon Valley

time in the firm’s history that a woman will hold the top leadership position.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner? While I work broadly in the private funds space, for the past four years, I’ve been Ropes & Gray’s leading hedge fund specialist on the West Coast. In this role, I’ve hired and mentored a diverse team of associates here. As a result, I’ve contributed to the depth and breadth of our offerings to hedge funds clients in the region and the development of our overall asset management practice in

this geography. My goal is to provide top tier legal advice and support, and in this regard, my own values and philosophies have always heavily aligned with those of the firm. Ropes & Gray very much prioritizes next-level client service and building trusted advisor relationships—I've always had strong conviction in this mandate and apply it to my own practice.

Describe how you feel now about your career now that you've made partner. It's been empowering. I've devoted nearly my entire career to Ropes & Gray, and I strongly believe in what we offer in terms of client service. Making partner has further empowered me to continue to deliver on this and grow our West Coast platform.

What's the key to successful business development in your opinion? Understanding our clients' businesses: the way their organizations work, their day-to-day demands, and operational complexities. Once a client trusts that I understand their business, we can solve their legal issues in more thoughtful and effective way.

My in-house experience has also given me firsthand experience in understanding the demands and pressures lawyers face within their organizations. In particular, I appreciate that internal clients can present uniquely demanding challenges.

What's been the biggest change, day-to-day, in your routine since



Melissa Bender, center, is joined by some of the other women promoted to partner at Ropes & Gray in 2018.

becoming partner? My engagement as a formal mentor to associates and participation in recruiting efforts has increased, particularly as we continue to build out our West Coast asset management team.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to partner? Laurel FitzPatrick, Ropes & Gray asset management partner. Laurel founded Ropes & Gray's hedge funds practice more than 15 years ago and is well-known in the industry—really a star in our field—and has been central in creating a leading hedge funds practice. She's also been an inspiration to me in the sense that she also went in-house to hedge fund Tiger Management, and similarly returned to private practice. As I've navigated my own career path,

shaped my own practice and built out our hedge funds capabilities on the West Coast, she's served as a tremendous role model and supporter of my work.

What's the best piece of advice you could give an associate who wants to make partner? Be fearless. When something feels hard or uncomfortable, push yourself to stick with it. Find a firm that shares your values and inspires you to achieve your goals.

It's also important to seek out mentors and role models at your firm. Share your goals with them and be open to the knowledge and experiences they share with you.

If you have a recent partner at an Am Law 200 firm to suggest for this series, please contact Jonathan Ringel at jringel@alm.com.

