

Black History Month: Arnold & Porter's Kathleen Harris

14 October 2020



I went to a state school in North London. One of the biggest challenges was getting people to accept that you had the ability to pursue goals. I watched a documentary when I was 16 called 14 days in May. It was about Edward Earl Johnson who was innocent and was on death row in the US. It inspired me to pursue a career where I could try and make a difference.

I am one of those people who knew what I wanted to do from an early stage of my life. Prior to a career in law I wanted to pursue a career in the police force. I thought it would be fascinating to work on cases, learn new facts and work on things where I can make difference.

I felt the Bar route was the only route where you could not be pigeonholed by others. You could either stand up and present a case or

you couldn't. I went from the Bar to the civil service to a law firm. When I joined a firm, I was excited to develop my skills and demonstrate my own capabilities. The Civil Service was a good part of my journey and I was pleased to succeed to become a Senior Civil Servant.

The biggest challenge was getting the right information and having people you could talk to about what their experiences were. At the time there weren't many accessible role models and it was difficult to get information. I used to be a justice's clerk before I qualified as a barrister and that allowed me to see one aspect of the career I was ultimately going to continue pursuing.

In the industry there is clearly a diversity issue and there are many hurdles you face either because you don't look the same, you enjoy different things or you don't actually engage in the negative behaviour you watch others portray.

Recently someone said to me 'you are not a typical black person'. What amazed me is that they couldn't see how offensive that comment could be. The whole point of equality is that you are treating everyone the same and not trying to label people.

The insistence from negative people to continue labelling people demonstrates the barriers that exist. The biggest challenge when faced with adversity is staying true to yourself, seek out positive people and ensure when you are in the position to make a difference, you do it.

There are now more organisations that do focus on providing information across the board not just in the legal sector. Many industries have recognised that an information channel is key and positive steps have been taken to improve.

A law firm is representative of society of whole and faces the same challenges as business in relation to Diversity. If you do not diversify at the beginning of the journey and aren't looking at the number of BAME solicitors that are qualifying and helping them in the early stages, then what happens is your throughput at the end is a much smaller pool of people. The only way the legal sector is going to change is it changes with the communities that work with it and continues to make a meaningful commitment to change.