

# LEADING LAW FIRM *Rainmakers*



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or *Diversity & the Bar's* fourth rainmaker feature, sixteen partners share their formula for success. Time and again, it boils down to two words: client service. If nothing else, the vagaries of the economy over the last few years have shown attorneys the importance of versatility, creativity, and flexibility in keeping clients happy. While some attorneys have expanded their practice areas, others explore creative billing options. But ultimately, all agree that understanding your client's business and remaining responsive are the linchpins of success.

Additionally, the interviewed minority attorneys suggest that more and more rainmakers are team players. Increasingly, partners rely on tips from colleagues and business development support to bring in new clients. A willingness to work hard and superb substantive skills are considered rainmaker requirements. Without these qualities, it is almost impossible to attract and retain clients. One partner sums it up nicely in saying: "Unless you're doing really good work, you can wine and dine and do pitches until you're blue in the face and you're not going to be that successful."

As in previous years, these rainmakers were selected from a pool of nominees suggested by leading firms from across the country. Each attorney maintains a regular book of business reaching or exceeding \$2 million a year. In making its selections, MCCA weighed the attorneys' geographic locations and practice areas, as well as their gender and ethnicity, in order to present the most diverse and well-rounded group possible.

Similar to last year, many of those interviewed are uncomfortable with the "rainmaker" moniker, regarding it as a little outdated or over-the-top; however, when it comes down to brass tacks, they all concur that firms are businesses and the ability to bring in clients is key in determining both their firms' success and the trajectory of their own careers. Call them what you will, but partners who consistently generate a sizable amount of business hold a vital, almost magical, place in the profession.



**Cesar L. Alvarez**

*Executive Chairman*

Greenberg Traurig, LLP

Miami, FL

Years Practicing: 37

Area of Practice: Corporate & Securities

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As a young law student, Cesar Alvarez dreamed of hanging a shingle with his attorney brother. His mentor, one of Greenberg Traurig's founding partners, Mel Greenberg, had other ideas about the up-and-coming attorney's future. "Mel was smart. He realized Cubans were in Miami to stay and he wanted to penetrate that market by hiring Hispanic attorneys," Alvarez recounts. "He persuaded me that as a transactional attorney I'd have a more satisfying career at his growing firm."

Several decades later, Alvarez reports that Greenberg was right. He also states that "if you're not generating business, you don't have control of your own destiny." The path to success, he explains, is twofold: Being the best technical lawyer you can be, and understanding your clients' businesses.

Born in Cuba, Alvarez's family came to the United States in 1960. "We didn't have a lot and didn't know the language. Nonetheless, my parents gave us an option: Go to college or die." Prior to attending the University of Florida Levin College of Law, he earned both an undergraduate business degree and an M.B.A.; a grounding that proved to be perfect preparation for his career at Greenberg Traurig. Even though many aspiring attorneys pursue undergraduate degrees in political science before entering law school, Alvarez advises that a working knowledge of accounting and finance is more beneficial. "At the end of the day, rainmaking requires making a sophisticated sale and not all lawyers are good salesmen. Any great salesman will tell you that the key to success is the willingness and desire to knock on that next door."



**David T. Biderman**

*Partner*

Perkins Coie

San Francisco, CA

Years Practicing: 26

Area of Practice: Class Action, Product Liability

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Early in his career, David Biderman thought more about the work than following a deliberate path: "My focus was exclusively trained on serving the clients and matters with product that met their needs." Upon reflection, however, he says if he had to do it again, he might have also given thought to some long-range planning.

"It pays to chart out a plan. Having a third party with whom to set goals for one, three, and five years out can be very helpful. It's something I try to do now and probably should have begun earlier."

Fortunately, says Biderman, over the years he has been privileged to work with clients who are not only excellent professionals, but also appreciative. He respects them professionally and likes them personally. "Also," he adds, "I enjoy learning about their business and try to provide solutions that meet their business needs. I like to think this helps in attracting our services." Biderman currently handles complex class actions and mass tort litigation. Among other things, he manages a group of lawyers defending approximately 1000 toxic tort cases pending in California state courts.

Biderman's mother was a Nisei (a first-generation Japanese American) devoted to social justice. She attended college in Vermont on a Quaker-sponsored scholarship and later met Biderman's father while attending graduate school in Chicago.

"Not surprisingly, education was important in our home," shares Biderman, who grew up in the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., and graduated from the University of Virginia School of Law. "As an attorney, striving for excellence while serving our clients is essential. That's the baseline. Only then does the work follow."



### **Jean Burke Fordis**

#### *Partner*

Finnegan, Henderson, Farabow, Garrett & Dunner LLP  
Palo Alto, CA

Years Practicing: 26

Area of Practice: Intellectual Property

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“Finnegan is not an ‘eat what you kill’ firm,” explains Jean Fordis. “All clients are considered firm clients. That said, it’s still very important to generate business. We encourage our attorneys to develop a niche for themselves, and to broaden relationships with current clients as well as the clients that other partners might have brought in.”

Fordis’ two-pronged patent transaction and strategic counseling practice is rooted in areas that have been of interest to her since the early years of her legal career. Much of her work consists of helping to build portfolios for small, startup biotech companies located in California’s Silicon Valley. Because their IP departments are nonexistent or very small, Fordis essentially works in-house for the fledgling corporations.

The remainder of Fordis’ business mainly concerns Japanese pharmaceutical companies: “My mother is Japanese. As an associate, I began traveling with Finnegan partners to the firm’s Tokyo office to meet with pharmaceutical companies and talk about the latest U.S. patent laws. Over the years, I have continued making this trip once or twice a year, and have found it professionally and personally satisfying.”

At Finnegan, rainmaking involves more than bringing in clients. “It’s important to surround yourself with good attorneys who can support you in keeping the clients happy,” she adds. “I’ve worked closely with younger attorneys to ensure that our clients are in good hands at all times, whether I’m traveling or involved in other firm business. Developing talent in the firm is critical.”



### **Jennifer L. Hernandez**

#### *Partner*

Holland & Knight  
San Francisco, CA

Years Practicing: 26

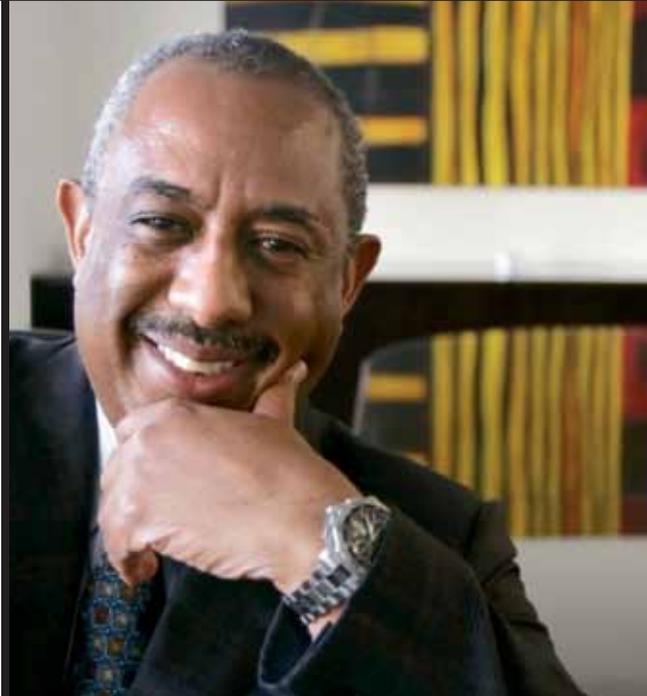
Area of Practice: Environmental Law

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Early in her legal career, Jennifer Hernandez was counseled against using humor in the workplace. She was advised to cut her long hair and not to use a computer at her desk because she might be mistaken for a secretary. Hernandez chose to disregard these and other well-intentioned suggestions, and instead drew up her very own map to success.

“From the day you start practicing law you’re engaged in professional development activities,” explains Hernandez, a Stanford Law School grad who today—long hair and sense of humor still intact—heads a 20-person practice group at Holland & Knight. Her approach to generating work (which she has successfully applied to herself and many of the attorneys with whom she works) involves writing, teaching, nonprofit board experience, and responsiveness to clients. Given commitment and barring economic downturns, attests Hernandez, her formula typically results in a book of one million dollars plus in eight to ten years.

Hernandez’s ambition sprang from the problems that women and minorities have historically faced in the profession: “There’s the lack of mentorship and the absence of a pipeline of inherited projects.” Her early rainmaking success was attributed to “serendipity” by an older male partner. “And while people are very comfortable with smart women serving as lieutenants in law firms, it’s not the same as being the captain,” she says. “That requires having your own book of business. It’s only then that you can do the work you love and not just what comes through the door. And even captain status and success don’t resolve everything.”



### **Gary T. Lafayette**

*Partner*

Lafayette & Kumagai LLP

San Francisco, CA

Years Practicing: 31

Area of Practice: Litigation

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“First, I put the potential client at ease,” explains Gary Lafayette, litigating partner of Lafayette & Kumagai LLP. “Then I present our track record—that’s important for an 11-person firm. We’ve argued at the [U.S.] Supreme Court, handled and defeated motions for class certification. We’ve tried difficult cases and prevailed. It’s important that clients understand the value that my firm and I bring to resolving problems.”

A graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law, Lafayette spent five years as a litigator at Pettit & Martin. In 1985, he joined minority-owned Alexander, Millner & McGee (which became McGee, Lafayette, Willis and Greene, and then Arnelle, Hastie, McGee, Willis & Greene), and then in 1994, established his current litigation firm. Throughout his career, he has strived to maintain a nice book of portable business. Without it, Lafayette says, he feels vulnerable.

Growing up in what were essentially the projects of West Dallas, Texas, Lafayette remembers his parents telling him that, as a minority, he had to be “twice as good.” Throughout his career, those words have echoed through his thoughts: “Failing is never an option for me,” he says. “If I fail at something, I let down a lot more people than myself. That may seem like old-fashioned thinking, but that’s how I feel.”

More and more Lafayette is concerned with training the junior attorneys at his firm: “It’s great that I got to where I am, but now it’s time for me to help others realize their full potential, to make certain they have the confidence to be the best they can possibly be.”



### **Theodora R. Lee**

*Partner/Shareholder*

Littler Mendelson PC

San Francisco, CA

Years Practicing: 23

Area of Practice: Employment

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Theodora R. Lee could use more time. Her biggest professional challenge is that there are only 24 hours in a day. She wakes up and goes to bed with her Blackberry, and every hour in-between concentrates on client service and business development. Happily, her hard work pays off—Lee is currently among the top 10 percent of rainmakers at Littler Mendelson PC, an 800-attorney, labor and employment firm.

Lee joined Littler just after graduating from University of Texas School of Law. After five years, she temporarily left the San Francisco-based firm to start the labor and employment practice group for a general practice firm located across the bay in Oakland. “At the time, most of the minority and women attorneys at Littler were working as service attorneys for the senior attorneys, and I did not want to do that,” she recalls. “At the Oakland firm, I was able to develop a book of local business. Upon returning to [Littler], I was able to expand my already sizable book of business by using Littler’s national platform. As a young lawyer, I understood that business generation was the key to success.”

The daughter of schoolteachers, Lee grew up in Dallas. Her grandfather was a sharecropper. “From an early age, it was drilled into my head that education makes the difference between a comfortable and a struggling life,” remembers Lee. “I’m a firm believer in giving back. I go into high schools and colleges to encourage students to attend law school. Education and hard work are key points in my life. Together they make so much possible.”



### **Ava E. Lias-Booker**

*Partner*

McGuire Woods

Baltimore, MD

Years Practicing: 24

Area of Practice: Complex Commercial Litigation

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Ava Lias-Booker knew at 12 that she was destined to be a trial attorney. The first in her family to attend college, she and her parents never doubted that she would reach her goal, but they were a little unsure about how to get there. “We were incredibly naïve and I think it was our strength,” she says. “We just moved forward with the assumption that my brother and I could be anything that we wanted to be if we were willing to work hard enough to get there, and I’ve carried that attitude throughout my life. I always assume that I can do something so long as I can find the time and, if needed, acquire the skill set.”

An office managing partner, Lias-Booker is savvy about the business side of law: “I went to law school to practice law, but it’s not that simple,” she explains. “Early on at my first firm, a wonderful mentor sat me down and explained that while he wanted me to be a good lawyer, he also wanted me to be a member of the firm and that included focusing on the development and growth of the firm. He made it very clear that to succeed at a firm I’d need to be good at business development.”

She worked to bring in new business based on a strong network of contacts—none of whom she met on the golf course—and women and minority professionals are a significant part of this network.

“At the end of the day,” she says, “business development is about the consistent delivery of solid and effective results and the cultivation of key and strategic relationships. With the right approach, it can be one of the more enjoyable and rewarding aspects of your career—it has certainly developed that way for me.”



### **Devan V. Padmanabhan**

*Partner*

Dorsey & Whitney LLP

Minneapolis, MN

Years Practicing: 18

Area of Practice: Intellectual Property

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Uncomfortable with the rainmaker label, Devan Padmanabhan, a partner at Dorsey & Whitney LLP, describes himself as “someone who has had the good fortune to bring in work.” His approach to generating new business is collaborative and very time intensive.

“Often I learn about new clients through colleagues. Then I spend a lot of time figuring out what the client’s problems are and coming up with as many solutions as possible to make their life easier,” he says. “My goal is to convey that I’m an expert and that I’m there to help. No matter the outcome, I want to leave feeling I’ve given them something they can use.” He advises young attorneys to “find opportunities to spend more time with your clients. Learn a client’s business so you can apply your craft in a more meaningful way.”

Born in India, Padmanabhan immigrated to the U.S. with his family when he was nine. They settled in Wichita, Kan., where his father worked as an aeronautical engineer. Prior to attending Chicago’s Northwestern University School of Law, he earned a degree in electrical engineering. Today, the main focus of his practice is patent litigation.

“My practice is very integrated with the firm,” explains Padmanabhan, who has spent his entire professional career at Dorsey & Whitney. “Many other people are entrenched in the work that I’ve helped to bring in and that is especially satisfying to me. Unlike some rainmakers, I don’t see my business as portable. If I were ever to go to a different firm, I’d leave a lot of work behind.”



### **Karl A. Racine**

*Managing Partner*

Venable LLP

Washington, DC

Years Practicing: 21

Area of Practice: Firm Management, Government Investigations and Civil Litigation

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Long before he decided to pursue a career in law, Karl Racine felt inspired by the historic work performed by Charles Hamilton Houston, Thurgood Marshall, Constance Baker Motley, William Hastie, and other African American lawyers. At the same time, he was also aware that he possessed a certain contrariness that made the prospect of becoming a professional advocate very attractive to him. After taking a trial advocacy course from Judge James R. Spencer (E.D., VA), at the University of Virginia School of Law, Racine knew for sure that he wanted to be a trial lawyer.

Born in Haiti, Racine has lived most of his life in Washington, D.C. Today, as the only African American Managing Partner of an AmLaw 100 firm, he concentrates his efforts on understanding the opportunities and challenges that confront the firm's clients. Racine strives to ensure that every client's needs are met and excellent service is provided.

Racine—a former public defender with the Public Defender Service of the District of Columbia and Associate White House Counsel under President Bill Clinton—also focuses on growing Venable's government investigations practice, representing companies and individuals subject to inquiry, investigation, regulation, and enforcement actions initiated by the government.

"My advice to young professionals is to never be afraid of taking on the most challenging work and always put your clients first. A lawyer is only as good as his/her clients."



### **Gustavo Siller Jr.**

*Partner*

Brinks Hofer Gilson & Lione

Chicago, IL

Years Practicing: 27

Area of Practice: Intellectual Property

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Three or four times a year, Gustavo Siller Jr. travels to China. Each visit, he zigzags the massive country providing IP education. "Innovation and technology in China are huge, but a lot of their companies don't know how to go global. They're not used to entering foreign markets and are unsure about how they should be protecting their technology and products and where they should be spending money," he explains. "Our challenge is to convince clients and prospective clients that we will provide more value than they will spend."

Siller's other rainmaking role at Brinks is that of relations partner. As the point person to three or four of the firm's largest clients, he does some litigation, but is mainly focused on keeping these key clients out of litigation and supervising their patent portfolios. "For some of our clients we're the only IP firm they use and I want to maintain that," he says. "For those who use us and others, my goal is to convince them to make ours their only firm."

Born in Mexico, Gustavo earned his J.D. at DePaul University and has lived most of his life in the Windy City. His advice to young attorneys seeking rainmaker status is not to make the mistake of looking at things on a project-by-project basis. "Doing pristine work is great, but until you understand the client's business you'll never be the go-to person. Clients call me because I've worked hard to know their business and to understand their individual litigation philosophy."



### **Claudius O. Sokenu**

*Partner*

Arnold & Porter  
New York City, NY  
Years Practicing: 12  
Area of Practice: Securities Litigation & Enforcement;  
White Collar Criminal Defense; and Complex Commercial  
Litigation

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Claudius Sokenu attributes his success to strategy, luck, and God's good grace: "As a minority, it's particularly important to be in control of my own career," he says.

After about four years in the Enforcement Division of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, Sokenu joined Mayer Brown as a litigator. He purposely selected a firm that was not top heavy with former SEC officials. "This way," he recounts. "I'd be sure to have a front row seat on the bigger cases. As planned, I soon became the go-to attorney for a lot of clients and in a fairly short time assembled a good book of business. Two years ago, I took my clients and moved to Arnold & Porter for a more stable platform."

Born and educated mostly in London, England, Sokenu first came to the United States to earn an LL.M. in securities and financial regulation at Georgetown University Law Center, after which he joined the SEC's Enforcement Division. Undaunted by not having the luxury of an extensive network of stateside college and law school classmates, he quickly set about making himself known by regularly writing and speaking about his practice areas—securities litigation and enforcement and white collar criminal defense.

Today, Sokenu continues to represent multinational companies in major financial and securities law matters, including Avon Products, Inc. in an FCPA internal investigation and Ernst & Young Global Limited in Madoff related litigation, among others.



### **Robert L. Soza Jr.**

*Partner*

Jackson Walker LLP  
San Antonio, TX  
Years Practicing: 21  
Area of Practice: Litigation, International

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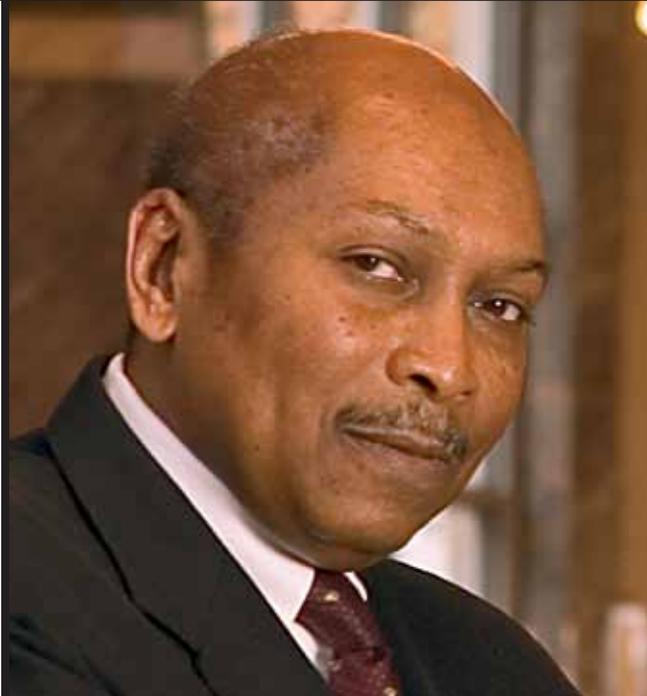
Unlike many of his Mexican American peers growing up in West Texas, Robert L. Soza Jr. was never discouraged from speaking Spanish at home. In fact, his college-educated parents not only encouraged him to remain fluent in his first language, but they urged him to explore his Hispanic cultural identity as well. Those decisions eventually paid off in ways he could not have anticipated.

After earning his J.D. from the University of Texas, Soza focused on environmental law and customs, but with the passage of NAFTA, everything changed. "Speaking Spanish became an invaluable asset," he says. "I began working with U.S. companies in Latin America and Spanish-speaking foreign nationals doing business here."

Soza says nurturing existing relationships is his strength. "Some rainmakers excel at going out and forging a constellation of new relationships," he says. "That's not my skill set. In one year I'll generate a lot of business, but it will typically come from four or five clients."

"I tend to concentrate on clients with whom I feel that I can develop a lasting relationship. If I'm hired by a client for some matter, I'll do what it takes to get to know them better. Whether that means visiting them on our dime, or attending a rank and file employee training to get to know their product better, I'm willing to put in the time."

Soza's game plan is to continue working with colleagues and clients that he knows well and respects. For him, lasting relationships and rainmaking go hand-in-hand.



### **Bernard Taylor**

*Partner*

Alston Bird LLP

Atlanta, GA

Years Practicing: 29

Area of Practice: Litigation

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When attorneys talk about partnering with clients, they need to be genuine. For Bernard Taylor, that means sticking with a client through both good and not-so-great times. “Lately a lot of firms and clients have experienced challenging circumstances,” he reflects. “Partnering doesn’t stop: That’s when we as attorneys need to step up and share the risk and the difficulties. It’s only then that clients know we’re sincere.”

Furthermore, Taylor advises those who may want to follow in his rainmaking tracks to learn the craft and make sure they understand rules of evidence. He warns against becoming stagnant: “I think it’s very important for a young, would-be trial attorney to be very excited about it. Be willing to try new things. Don’t get stuck in habits, and always keep an open mind in regard to trial practice—it’s ever-changing.”

A passionate litigator, Taylor appreciates the business side of the profession too. “Firms are private enterprises, after all,” he notes. “As a partner I have a stake in both my practice and the firm. And as the co-products liability group leader, it’s important to create an atmosphere that encourages members to grow their practices. Providing them with resources is also vital. When they succeed, the firm succeeds.”

“I’ve been fortunate,” Taylor explains. “At Alston & Bird, I work with a team of top-quality lawyers and an equally good staff. Over the years, we’ve developed a shared vision and a strategy of how to operate as a team. And as such we work together to meet our clients’ needs.”



### **Diana Torres**

*Partner*

Kirkland & Ellis LLP

Los Angeles, CA

Years Practicing: 18

Area of Practice: Intellectual Property

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The phrase “my client” is not in Diana Torres’ lexicon. “Maybe if I were to go out on my own and do a case without associate or paralegal help it might be different,” she explains. “But as it is, it’s always our client.”

After spending most of her career at another firm, Torres joined Kirkland in 2008. “I’ve been able to find a niche here,” she says. “Kirkland has incredible client relations, but they didn’t have anyone on the West Coast who focuses on soft IP—copyright, trademark, Internet, and false advertising.”

Torres credits her success with clients to a combination of things: “There is no ‘I’ in my advice to clients,” says Torres, who earned her J.D. from Yale. “Clients’ interests come first. If it’s in their interest to end a case, that’s what I do regardless of how it affects me. This is how I develop trust with a client.”

“Also,” she continues, “unless you’re doing really good work, you can wine and dine and do pitches until you’re blue in the face and you’re not going to be that successful.”

Originally from Long Island, Torres enjoys working on cases as part of a team. “I’ve never been in a firm where you get origination credit,” she notes. “Business comes from clients calling me directly and from colleagues asking me to pitch in on anything from a ten-minute phone call to a substantial matter. That said, my relationships with clients are very often long-lasting and mean a lot to me.”



### **Margaret Wong**

#### *Principle Partner*

Margaret W. Wong and Associates Co., LPA  
Cleveland, OH  
Years Practicing: 34  
Area of Practice: Immigration

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“I truly lucked out with immigration law,” says Margaret Wong, principle partner of Margaret W. Wong and Associates. “Because I’m an immigrant myself, I’ve always been especially passionate about my practice area, and over the years have become very good at it.”

Wong arrived in the U.S. from Hong Kong in 1969 on a student visa. After putting herself through college at Western Illinois University and then the University at Buffalo Law School by waiting tables, she became one of the first non-U.S. citizens licensed to practice law in New York and Ohio. In time, Wong became a citizen and put out her own shingle. Today, she has offices in Cleveland and Columbus, Ohio; and in Detroit, Michigan.

Wong credits her sizable business success to substantive ability and endurance: “I do good work and I never give up. Regardless of the frustrations and obstacles along the way, I keep on going.” Wong’s own experience obtaining a green card and U.S. citizenship makes her especially skilled in navigating the often byzantine immigration law process. It also makes her especially empathetic to her clients’ needs. She characterizes her life’s work as “helping other immigrants.”

“Right now is an especially great time for immigration law,” Wong reports. “A lot of issues are ripe for litigation. To a large extent, immigration is admin law—you spend a lot of time filling out forms and going to agencies. But in recent years, it’s become more sophisticated. There are more opportunities to go to court, and that’s when a lawyer shines.”



### **Kathleen J. Wu**

#### *Partner*

Andrews Kurth LLP  
Dallas, TX  
Years Practicing: 25  
Area of Practice: Real Estate and Finance

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For a real estate and finance partner like Kathleen Wu, maintaining rainmaker status throughout a challenging economy has been no mean feat. “It’s helped that my practice is very varied,” she explains. “Prior to the [housing] slump I was doing more origination of loan and real estate development work. Now I’ve transitioned more into special servicing work and other areas unique to this part of the economic cycle we now find ourselves in. It’s important to be flexible not only substantively but in terms of understanding and anticipating clients’ needs. Whatever the economic environment, genuine interest in clients and deeply caring about the work product contribute to a winning formula.”

A graduate of Columbia University and George Washington University, Wu fell into the legal profession by default. Her early years as an associate were exceedingly stressful. She worked for several very demanding partners and each transaction that crossed her desk was more complex than the last. Then, in her sixth year, something changed.

“After thousands of hours of work, I all-of-a-sudden became very confident. I recall thinking, ‘OK, this is something I can do. I have a real future here.’”

Wu stresses that “rainmaker” is not a title she can hang her hat on. “You must prove yourself everyday,” she says. “Whether the client or deal at hand is big or small, you must provide an excellent level of service. All the networking in the world cannot replace a reputation for consistent, high-quality work. It’s not easy, but if you approach this in a proactive, thoughtful way, it definitely pays off.”