

How I Made Partner: 'It's Okay if the Path You Take Is Not the Traditional One,' Says Jennifer Keighley of Orrick

By ALM Staff

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**Jennifer Keighley, 39, Partner at Orrick
Herrington & Sutcliffe, New York, New York**

Practice area(s): Complex litigation and dispute resolution, Supreme Court and appellate, securities litigation

Law school and year of graduation: Yale Law School, 2010

The following has been edited for style.

How long have you been at the firm?

Five years.

What was your criteria in selecting your current firm?

My top priority was finding a firm with kind, smart, talented and caring colleagues. I knew how much my happiness (and success) depended on liking the people that I was working with every day. And I was confident I would find that at Orrick because (1) my husband had worked at the firm previously, and so I knew several folks at the firm already through him; and (2) Orrick was my co-counsel on a few of my cases at Planned Parenthood (where I worked prior to joining the firm).

My other main criterion was finding a firm with a strong appellate group where I could focus on brief writing because I'd discovered over my years of practicing that writing briefs was my favorite part of being a lawyer. Finally, I was drawn to Orrick because I knew that the firm had a very well-established flexible work policy—when I joined Orrick, my twin boys were about to turn three, and I wanted to join a firm that supported flexible work schedules.



Courtesy photo

Jennifer Keighley of Orrick

Were you an associate at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one and how long were you there?

I was a summer associate at O'Melveny my 2L summer, but I had otherwise never worked in Big Law. Following law school, I clerked on the Ninth Circuit, did an academic fellowship at Yale Law School, and worked at a boutique civil rights and commercial firm (Emery Celli Brinkerhoff Ward & Maazel). And then most recently, I was a staff attorney in the public policy litigation and law department at Planned Parenthood Federation of America for 4.5 years.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner? Was it your performance on a specific case? A personality trait? Making connections with the right people?

I think the key factor was the booming growth of our financial services litigation practice, and the instrumental role I had played on a number of our financial services cases. For example, I had played a key role on the briefing team for our case on behalf of Credit Suisse before the New York Court of Appeals, where we obtained a precedent-setting victory that resulted in the team being named Litigators of the Week by *The American Lawyer*. And because of that victory and others, our financial services work is growing, and so the firm could see a real need for another partner to join the team and continue growing the practice.

Who had or has the greatest influence in your career and why?

I would not be where I am today without my mentor and sponsor, Rich Jacobsen, the head of Orrick's financial services litigation practice. Rich has always been willing to go out of his way to support me, sponsoring me in the partnership process, promoting me and my work internally and externally, advocating for me to be in client-facing roles on my cases, including me in pitches, and inviting me to client-facing events. For instance, Rich brought me on to work with him on the briefing in the Credit Suisse case before the New York Court of Appeals, which was the biggest argument of his career and which laid the groundwork for my promotion as partner.

I also would not be where I am today without my family. My wonderful husband is an amazing partner in raising our kids, and his unwavering support and encouragement has been instrumental in allowing me to achieve professional success. And my parents instilled in me an incredibly hard work ethic, especially my mom who worked full-time while raising three kids while my Dad was travelling internationally for work 70% of the time—I still don't know how she did it.

Finally, I really owe a debt of gratitude to my former colleagues at Planned Parenthood, particularly Carrie Flaxman and Helene Krasnoff. They trained me as a lawyer (I find myself writing comments on briefs that mirror comments that I received from them), as well as served as great role models of how to succeed as lawyer moms.

What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner?

Build relationships with partners who are interested in helping you to achieve your career goals. Having somebody in your corner who is actively interested in supporting your advancement is invaluable in the partnership process. For me, I remember Rich asking me shortly after joining Orrick if I was interested in making partner and describing how that path unfolds. It was an unexpected conversation—I had just started working in Big Law and had no idea if I wanted to pursue the partnership path. But Rich was impressed enough with my work that he took an active interest in my career. His investment in my success is without question the reason I made partner.

And I'd also note that your mentor/sponsor doesn't need to be somebody who has the same background or interests outside of work as you. Rich and I could not be more different, and if you had asked me who was likely to be my mentor, Rich is not who I would have pictured. But he has always emphasized that to be a successful lawyer, you simply need to be smart, work hard and be a good person. Regardless of your interests outside of work, what ultimately matters is whether you and your mentor can work together to achieve your career goals. I note, however, that Rich and I both ended up at the same night of the Taylor Swift concert last year—he was taking his daughters to the concert—so maybe we're not that different after all!

When it comes to career planning and navigating inside a law firm, in your opinion, what's the most common mistake you see other attorneys making?

I often see attorneys who aren't taking enough initiative or ownership over their career path. And don't get me wrong—I know it can be hard to take those steps, especially when you aren't even sure what your career goals are. But the reality is that, especially at a big law firm, most folks are incredibly busy. And so if you are sitting in the wings waiting for somebody to notice your good work and take an interest in helping you to find the next step in your career path (whether that's in a firm or

elsewhere in the legal world), you may be waiting for a really long time. If you never voice what your goals are or ask for help achieving those goals, you risk being overlooked and not advancing. Especially in this world of hybrid/remote work, junior lawyers really need to seek out mentorship and advice from their colleagues.

What challenges, if any, did you face or had to overcome in your career path and what was the lesson learned? How did it affect or influence your career?

I've always suffered from classic imposter syndrome. That has led me to say no to certain opportunities because I thought that I wasn't qualified enough or wouldn't have enough time to prepare. But as I've gotten more experience, I've realized that other people will say yes to opportunities even if they don't necessarily have the perfect qualifications. The lesson for those of us who have imposter syndrome is to not count yourself out just because you think you don't have enough experience. You're cheating yourself out of opportunities, and if you don't put yourself out there, it's unlikely that those opportunities are just going to fall in your lap.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self?

Careers are both unpredictable and long! You never know where your career might take you, and it's ok if the path you take is not the traditional one. I never envisioned that I would be a partner at a big New York law firm—that was certainly not my goal coming out of law school. I had this vision of all New York law firms being places where it would be impossible to have a successful career while also being the kind of parent I wanted to be to my kids. But the reality is that being a working parent is challenging no matter where you work, and I've been able to figure out a balance that works for me. Does that mean that I made partner when I had been out of law school for 12 years? Yes. But I didn't even join a big law firm until I had been out

of law school for 8 years. And I've been working on a reduced schedule since joining Orrick, which means that I have more time to spend with my amazing kids. Don't compare yourself to other people and their timeline. Everyone has different priorities and goals, and what matters is that you pursue the path that aligns with your priorities and your goals.

Do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development?

I am on a quest to convince associates (and partners) to use more co-editing tools when drafting and revising briefs, which saves time and ensures that edits aren't lost as multiple drafts are passed back and forth. I am also a big fan of using electronic case alerts both to track key legal issues and for business development.

How would you describe your work mindset?

Focused, determined and reliable.

If you participate in firm or industry initiatives, please mention the initiatives you are working on as well as the impact you hope to achieve.

I have always devoted a significant amount of time to the firm's pro bono efforts. After I joined Orrick, I was lucky enough to continue working pro bono on a few cases I had worked on while I was at Planned Parenthood. And I've also worked on a wide range of other pro bono matters while at Orrick, from briefing (and arguing) immigration appeals in the Fifth and Ninth Circuits, to drafting amicus briefs in the U.S. Supreme Court on a range of issues (including excessive force, the constitutionality of the death penalty, and reproductive rights). I firmly believe that all lawyers have a responsibility to give back to their communities by participating in pro bono work. In addition to the social value of pro bono work, these matters are often where associates will be able to take on leadership roles in their cases and obtain argument and other stand-up opportunities. So, I believe that partners have a duty to support and supervise associates doing pro bono work.