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# Women's History Month Attorney Spotlight: Althea Harris

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Althea W. Harris is an associate with the Construction Litigation and Insurance Coverage Group. Althea's practice consists of Commercial, Construction, Insurance Coverage and Risk Transfer, and General Tort Litigation. Learn more about Althea Harris through our Women's History Month Spotlight:

## **Who/What has inspired you the most in your career?**

My mentor P. Jean, Esq. greatly inspired me in my career. She accomplished much in her professional life and maintains a great balance with her personal/family life.

## **What is the most important advice you've been given?**

One of the most important pieces of advice I received is: there is value in negative feedback/criticism, find it and use it to improve.

## **What has been your greatest achievement(s)?**

This is such a complex question. In keeping with Women's History Month, I would say on a personal level, becoming a mother amid a successful career change is one of my greatest achievements. I gave birth to my twin boys while in law school and graduated on time. We had a long stay in the NICU. My boys are 6 years old now, healthy, and continue to serve as anchors whenever work becomes overwhelming.

## **What does Women's History Month mean to you?**

It is wonderful to acknowledge women's contributions to our society and our world. I believe that having a month to reflect on or learn about women's contributions serve as a constant reminder that the work is not completed. Tremendous progress has been made. More progress is needed in certain areas in the world as well as in our smaller communities or lives.

## **Why do you think diversity in the workplace is so important?**

Undoubtedly, there are substantial benefits; such as, access to a limitless pool of talents, skills, and experiences that a diverse workforce engenders. I believe the message that a diverse workforce communicates is impactful to stakeholders (employees, clients/customers), prospective stakeholders, and the general public. It communicates

that a particular company/organization not only potentially respects but also values the contribution that each of its diverse employee brings. It also communicates that a particular company/organization may be willing to avail its services/products to a wider range of clients/customers and signals that such a company may be equipped to address the varied needs of its clients or potential clients. In a way, I think that diversity upends our concepts of what is normal and creates the space to accept that all are created equal (or at a minimum, we all can be productive) regardless of age, sex, gender identity or orientation, race, ethnicity, physical abilities or challenges, politics, or socioeconomic status. Diversity makes room for a dynamic workforce that is sustainable and adaptive within an ever-changing global work environment.

### **What progress have you seen in gender equality in your life and work?**

Tremendous progress has been made, there are more women in positions of leadership. Many more great women are coming out from behind great men. I see women making choices about their professional lives. Women can pursue careers without having to become the trailblazer because that glass ceiling has been shattered. Yet, traditional expectations of gender roles pervade the workplace and women struggle with meeting perceived expectations and the highly competitive nature of certain jobs. I believe that we need more progress in the support of working mothers in the private sector, particularly working mothers mentoring/supporting working mothers- especially those with young children. Imagine, how much more progress will be realized. My mentor provides such mentorship/support for me. She's a partner and trailblazer in her field.

### **What qualities about you as a woman have contributed the most to a successful career?**

Women are amazing and many professional women beat the odds/thrive in adversity and succeed in their careers. In my own path, I found that in addition to having a strong support system, openness and respect in the workplace contribute to successful career. In the workplace, we still sometimes deal with ingrained/old-fashioned notions that a woman, particularly one who is a mother, contributes less than her male or unencumbered female counterparts. We still hear insensitive comments such as "childcare is not a conflict." However, I learned that speaking up/advocating for oneself can yield positive results. We teach our children to stand up for themselves, ask for what they want but we often do the opposite and end up struggling/feeling frustrated in our careers. Throughout my work life, I had reasonable/flexible bosses and that remains true here at Cullen and Dykman. Knowing when to advocate for oneself or ask for help from one's employer contributes to a successful career. We cannot expect flexibility from our bosses if we are not willing to share or ask for what we need.

### **What advice do you have for any women starting off in their career?**

Whitney Houston reprised Chaka Khan's "I'm every woman" and on a subliminal level, most women aspire to be "every woman": spouse/partner, friend, daughter, professional, and parent. We tend to be every woman to those we deem important in our lives. Women are fierce, strong, loyal, and nurturing. As a woman in a high-octane profession, I found that balance is critical for overall success. To achieve such balance, a woman has to create and maintain boundaries in the professional, personal, family, and social facets of her life. However, the key which is somewhat elusive or easy to get lost in the fray is that self-care is critical. Inevitably, it is our self-care (doing that which is necessary to maintain one's mental and physical health) that is sacrificed in the midst of

increasing work or family obligations. Bottomline, a woman should deliberately prioritize self-care from early on in her career to potentially stave off burnouts and facilitate professional and personal success.

## Attorneys

- Althea W. Harris