

# TAKING ON THE TECH WORLD: KING HALL WOMEN THRIVE

in Silicon Valley

By Sue Jones

Alica Del Valle '06

**The headlines are bleak: “Why Aren’t There More Women in Tech?” “What’s Holding Back Women in Tech?” “Hostility Toward Women in the Tech World,” and, from *The Atlantic*, “Why Is Silicon Valley So Awful to Women?” There is, however, at least one group of women that is extremely successful in the tech industry: King Hall alumnae.**

“King Hall women are in leading legal positions in Silicon Valley, working on cutting-edge cases in law and technology,” says Senior Associate Dean Madhavi Sunder. King Hall alumnae hold senior legal positions at some of the most powerful tech companies in Silicon Valley. Some examples are Alica Del Valle '06 at Airbnb, Deborah Davis Han '96 at Zynga, Jennifer Gossain '07 at Marvell Semiconductor, Inc., and both Sarah Fenn '07 and Tiffany Bui LeTourneau '11 at Uber.

The list broadens when we consider King Hall alumnae who specialize in technology at law firms. Karen Johnson-McKewan '85, a partner at Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe in San Francisco, leads her firm's relationship with Oracle Corporation, and led a large team litigating with the State of Oregon over that state's health insurance exchange implementation project. Suzanne Graeser '87 is a partner and former chair of the Emerging Companies & Venture Capital Group at Morrison Foerster. And many King Hall alumnae are associates specializing in technology at top law firms, including Cindy Chang '13 at Alston & Bird, Kunyu Ching '13 at Fenwick & West, Nish Hossain '15 at Goodwin Procter and Toni Qiu '14 at Sheppard Mullin.

In this sometimes challenging atmosphere, King Hall alumnae are also taking the lead in promoting diversity. As Director of Attorney Development and Women's Initiatives at Morrison Foerster, Janet Stone Herman '84 is actively improving the environment for woman lawyers.

Sunder points out that King Hall's own diversity is a boon to employers who want to improve diversity in their organizations. “King Hall has led the way to show that excellence and diversity in our student body are mutually reinforcing,” she says. “Technology law departments in Silicon Valley have a great partner in King Hall for recruiting the best and most diverse new lawyers.”

## MAKING THE CASE FOR GENDER DIVERSITY

Alumnae who work in the tech industry agree that gender diversity is crucial. Karen Johnson-McKewan explains, “The problems that technology companies are trying to solve are the most complex and novel problems in society. To solve them, we need creativity, and we don’t get that unless we have diverse perspectives, experiences and problem-solving approaches.”

Other alumnae echo her emphasis on diverse perspectives. “Different genders provide different styles of practice,” says Cindy Chang, “To be well-rounded, a firm needs all of the styles represented.”

Kunyu Ching agrees. “When you’re in front of a jury, the most important thing is presenting your case. The more perspectives you have on your team, the more likely you are to catch things that could hurt the jury’s perception of you and your case.”

Gender diversity, at all levels of an organization, is also important for recruitment. “In this day and age, if you are trying to recruit for women, and you don’t have women in leadership positions, then you’re stuck in a cycle of not being able to recruit women,” says Chang. Johnson-McKewan adds that gender diversity is now so expected that firms know that, without it, they won’t be able to hire the top male talent either.

Johnson-McKewan also points out another advantage of working in a gender-inclusive environment: “People are able to bring their best selves to the workplace when they are comfortable in their own skins.” When women are comfortable in their environment, “we are able to dedicate our thinking capacity to the problem, as opposed to diverting a portion of the mind to fitting in.”

## EMPLOYERS ARE LISTENING

Alumnae agree that much of the pressure to become more diverse is coming from the clients. “A lot of clients are now mandating we have diverse teams,” says Suzanne Graeser. Women have to be included and “not as tokens. They have to be actively involved in the project.”

As an in-house counsel, Jennifer Gossain confirms that tech companies expect law firms to have diverse teams. “We look for diversity in legal teams when selecting outside counsel. The firms are paying more attention to diversity in response.”

Morrison Foerster’s board is 39% women. The firm holds an invitation-only Summit for Women In-House Counsel



*Kunyu Ching '13*



*Karen Johnson-McKewan '85*

every eighteen months. “More and more women are general counsels,” Graeser says. The summit gives women an opportunity to network and learn. “It’s a great opportunity for general counsels and our firm’s partners to develop business and strengthen relationships,” she adds.

“Morrison Foerster is a pioneer in caring about these issues,” says Janet Stone Herman. “Bob Raven,” the firm’s chairman until 1982, “was very passionate about ensuring everyone had opportunities to grow and develop.” Today, says Herman, “we do a myriad of things to support the development and promotion of women. And we partner with clients to enhance diversity in the legal profession.”

Other firms also take pride in their efforts. Toni Qiu says that Sheppard Mullin’s office has always emphasized the importance of diversity. “It comes from the chairman all the way down.” The firm’s Women Lawyers Group is nearly thirty years old and holds monthly meetings addressing such topics as career and business development as well as wellness and time management.

Sheppard Mullin holds an annual women’s retreat, inviting not only its own lawyers but also potential and past clients. “Panelists talk about the challenges they’ve faced, and it’s also an opportunity to network across the firm,” says Qiu. “It involves all levels, from top partners to the most junior associates. It’s very rewarding.”

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**– Cindy Chang '13**



Johnson-McKewan is similarly positive about Orrick's initiatives. She co-leads Orrick's Women's Initiative, which created a Women's Leadership Board involving senior leaders from businesses like Facebook, NVIDIA, Oracle, and Paypal. These advisors give the firm outside input on promoting diversity.

Several alumnae bring up the Mansfield Rule. Forty-four major law firms have pledged to prove that at least thirty percent of their candidate pool for promotions, mid-level and senior hires, and significant leadership roles are composed of women and/or attorneys of color. The idea came out of the 2016 Women in Law Hackathon, and the rule is named after Arabella Mansfield, the first woman admitted to practice law in the United States.

## WOMEN STILL FACE CHALLENGES

Still, all of these positive efforts should not obscure the continuing challenges for women practicing law in the tech industry. While Nish Hossain has never worked on a team that was exclusively men except for her, she has heard stories from women who work elsewhere. One of her friends was pushed out of a group that focused on technology companies and onto a compensation and benefits group. The latter was considered more traditionally female. "Many areas within the practice of law are still closed off from women for one reason or another. It's absurd. I'm not sure what the barrier is. It's not formal." Instead, the women are made to feel "uncomfortable" there.

Hossain herself is comfortable with being one of the few women on a team. When she was pursuing her degrees in electrical and biomedical engineering, she was one of two women in a class of fifty. "I had to work twice as hard to show I was competent and could get stuff done." She adds, "As fewer and fewer women go into STEM, that will keep happening." Her experience at King Hall was very different. "I walked into the Law School and thought, 'Wow, there are a lot of women here.'"

As an engineer for five years before going to law school, Gossain was also "often the only woman in the room," and she became used to it. Now she often still is. The key, she says, is "ignoring the noise and focusing on what's important."

Herman also thinks it is important to stay aware of impediments to diversity. Looking for "cultural fit" in a job interview is one way that some companies exclude women and minorities. Unconscious bias is sometimes the culprit.



Janet Stone Herman '84



Suzanne Graeser '87

Herman points out that the numbers aren't as skewed at law firms as they are at some technology companies. Then again, "hardly any law firm has more than twenty percent woman partners." She also notes that many women tend to leave law firms in their forties and fifties, even if they have made partner.

## STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Unsurprisingly, all of the alumnae agree that the most important keys to success are hard work and talent. "Clients trust me to marshal strong teams, to be creative, and to be up to my elbows in work for them," says Johnson-McKewan. She adds that it is also important to "know how to have fun practicing law. Clients want to get a sense of my taking joy from the work."

The alumnae also all agree on the importance of networking and finding mentors. "Just talk to people," is the best advice she can give, says Qiu. "I knew the legal community was small, but it really is so, so small."

Gossain agrees that it's a "small world in the tech area." She points alumnae toward bar association networks and the gatherings tech companies host. For example, APABASV (<https://www.apabasv.com/>) provides many networking opportunities around the Bay Area such as brown bag lunch seminars and mentoring programs. Membership is free for law students.

Johnson-McKewan recommends ChIPs ([chipsnetwork.org](http://chipsnetwork.org)), a non-profit organization that offers networking, mentoring, advocacy and educational opportunities to women in technology, law, and policy.

While Chang strongly recommends attending networking events, she also took a very direct approach to networking to learn about the field before she even started law school. "I cold-emailed folks at law firms." She was told that none of them would have time to reply, but she actually received several responses. After she graduated, they helped her with her job search. "I'm still in contact with those people today."

Chang makes two important points about widening that network. First, "You will be talking with engineers and scientists. Networking with folks like that is also important. Network within the legal circle and the tech circle."

Second, don't forget to network with men. "My biggest mentor was not a woman or a minority," says Chang. Johnson-McKewan also notes that her principal mentors when she was starting out were men. In 1985, there were not many women in leadership positions in law firms.

Qiu notes that she was lucky to have had a "great mentor

and promoter.” She advises junior associates to find someone who “not only gives you work, but real and substantive work. Otherwise, you miss out on critical development of skills in your career.” She adds that it is also important for that mentor to review the work to help associates learn from their mistakes. “If you are not getting feedback, you need to be proactive. To be successful, you need to ask how you can improve.” In summary: “Get a great project, kill it more than you wreck it, gain trust. That’s how you grow.”

The alumnae offer other specific strategies. One tip from Graeser is to start at a private firm rather than in-house at a tech company. “Working in private practice in a firm with a technology focus can open doors to opportunities in-house.” She recommends working at the law firm for at least three years. In general, law firms provide more training than lawyers would receive working in-house, so lawyers are prepared to take a higher level in-house position often with greater advancement potential than they could have if they had started at a tech company.

Gossain also gives a specific tip: “Do your research.” She adds, “I thought I wanted to do patent prosecution. I summered at a prosecution firm, and then summered at a litigation firm.” The experiences helped her understand her options. “There are many different kinds of work. There are a lot of options.”

Another strategy is to become an expert in a specific area. “Find one part of the tech industry, become the expert

in it, and be very passionate about it,” advises Hossain. She recommends taking classes, going to conferences, and reading up on recent decisions. “If you are interested in a particular client, show that. Pitch yourself to the partner.”

“Focus on a few industries,” Graeser advises. “It’s like having a major with several minors.” Graeser also recommends staying aware of what is happening in the market by following sites like TechCrunch (techcrunch.com). “Know what’s happening so you can talk to clients intelligently about what they care about.”

Herman thinks it makes more sense to focus on a specific area later in a career. “First, learn the craft,” she says.

## IT HELPS TO BE A KING HALL ALUMNA

One specific strategy for success is to graduate from King Hall. Alumnae extol the quality of the legal education they received. According to Graeser, “King Hall taught me how to think and analyze issues and have an open mind.” She adds that King Hall “educates students to have good judgment and apply pragmatic and practical solutions. We like to recruit at Davis. It produces lawyers who have solid judgment and practical skills.”

Chang specifically praises the Intellectual Property Certificate program. “King Hall was good about bringing in classes taught by real practitioners,” she says. Not only did the classes teach skills, but they also connected students with contacts and potential mentors.

Gossain praises King Hall’s professors and the legal education they provided her. She also notes the benefits of the Law School’s location. “It’s close enough to Silicon Valley that we can interview easily. The career office setting up Bay Area interviews for us on campus is very helpful.”

Another important benefit Hossain lists is a person: Assistant Dean of Career Services Craig Compton. “Craig was so important to my career search,” she says. He gave her mock interviews, helped tweak her résumé, and explained in detail which firms were good for IP law and 2L summering. “I can’t express how grateful I am for his guidance. He gave me a glimpse of the expectations of law firms.”

## THRIVING ON THE CHALLENGES

The bleak headlines about women in the tech industry do reflect a challenging environment. King Hall alumnae are thriving on those challenges and playing leadership roles in their employers’ efforts to address them. What is most striking is their positivity.

“I have no regrets,” says Ching. “I’m pretty lucky to have landed where I landed.” 🌟



*Janet Herman as a student at King Hall.*