

## VIOLET CLARK | Using the Legal Profession to Pay it Forward

by Amanda Robert

Violet M. Clark grew up in East Harlem in New York. She attended public school and received an average education until the fifth grade, when an act of kindness changed her life.

Clark's mother worked as an aide in her school and met with the assistant principal to discuss the noticeable decline in her daughter's grades and enthusiasm for learning. The

The first female and first minority partner at **Laner Muchin Dombrow Becker Levin & Tominberg, Ltd.**, Clark credits that call for putting her in the position to return the favor and help others.

"I was given this incredible opportunity," she says. "I went from being a little kid in Harlem in this big public school where everybody was

a staff attorney with the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago. She became a senior trial attorney with the U.S. Employment Opportunity Commission in 1984 and began as an associate with Laner Muchin in 1988.

She largely counsels businesses in employment and labor relations matters and represents management before the EEOC, the Illinois Human Rights Commission, and state and federal courts. She also represents clients in wage and hour matters before the Illinois and U.S. Departments of Labor and in affirmative action matters with the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs.

She additionally serves as a hearing officer for the Cook County Commission on Human Rights and Chicago Commission on Human Relations, where she adjudicates discrimination claims.

For Clark, the most rewarding part of her job comes from working closely with clients.

"I like developing relationships and working with clients to solve their problems and to address their issues before they become problems," she says. "That's the social worker in me. I think it has a lot to do with the immediate gratification that I get when I hear the relief in clients' voices."

### A Means to an End

Clark prepared for her chosen career as an undergraduate at Brown University. She designed her own major around decision making, which included her consideration of major presidential decisions from political, sociological, and economic standpoints. She graduated in 1979.

She received her law degree from Cornell but spent her last year as a student-at-large at the University of Chicago Law School after she married J. Anthony Clark, an attorney who was working on a post-baccalaureate degree in labor relations in the Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

As a staff attorney with the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago, Clark acquired hands-on experience while handling cases downtown as well as in Pilsen and Englewood. Unfortunately, most of those cases involved



assistant principal agreed that the school was not challenging Clark, so he called and asked his friend, a headmaster at a nearby private school, for a favor. After meeting Clark, the headmaster accepted her into the sixth grade at the Town School the following year.

about the same to being in this small, intellectually-challenging environment that gave me access to a world with people from different social and economic backgrounds."

Clark, 53, graduated from Cornell University Law School in 1982 and started her career as

social issues rather than legal issues, she says.

"People were getting evicted, but the real issue was that they didn't have any money, or they had lost their jobs, or they were on public aid," Clark says. "I spent a lot of time putting off the inevitable. I could get your eviction thrown out, because the five-day notice wasn't issued properly, but that only meant that next week, the landlord was going to file it the right way."

In her three years as a senior trial attorney with the EEOC, Clark litigated complex cases pursuant to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act. She enjoyed her experience with employment-related, federal court litigation but learned that laws were slow to change and work was bureaucratic.

"A lot of it is focused on whether you're hitting your numbers, hitting your goals, hitting your targets, getting a certain number of cases, getting a certain amount of money, as opposed to the work you're doing," she says.

In 1987, Laner Muchin handled a lot of work for the City of Chicago and then-mayor Harold Washington and recognized the value of recruiting and retaining minority lawyers. Clark found the perfect fit at the labor and employment firm, and she has since formed long-term relationships with numerous clients, including several Chicago not-for-profit organizations.

Joseph M. Gagliardo joined Laner Muchin a couple of months after Clark. Now the firm's managing partner, he commends Clark for her friendly personality and her ability to gain the trust and respect of her clients.

"Violet has a way of working with clients very closely and not only addressing their legal issues, but addressing them in a practical, problem-solving way," Gagliardo says. "I've seen that she consistently is able to gain the confidence of clients, who then feel very comfortable with her handling of issues that are very important to them."

For clients in employment relations matters, Clark deals with all policies and procedures related to their employees. She addresses medical leave policies and what employers need to do if their employees cannot return to work. She handles age discrimination issues and how employers can modify jobs in situations involving their more senior employees. She also helps clients whose employees disclose disabilities and require accommodations to fulfill their job responsibilities.

For clients in labor relations matters, Clark drafts and negotiates labor contracts and attends labor management meetings, where union members and their employers sit down to work out their problems. She also handles

arbitration if grievances cannot be resolved.

Mischelle Causey-Drake, the chief operating officer and general counsel of the Jane Addams Hull House Association, first called on Clark more than 10 years ago for help negotiating the organization's union contracts.

Clark continues to advise Jane Addams in labor negotiation and in other labor and employment matters, and she always strives to find the best solution for the organization, Causey-Drake says.

"Sometimes when people are extremely bright, they can't give you the practical aspect of things or explain it to non-lawyers," she says. "The team we work with for union negotiations are not lawyers. She takes a long time explaining legal issues to them in a way that they can understand it."

Causey-Drake also developed a close friendship with Clark and appreciates that she makes those around her feel comfortable, she says.

"She's extremely approachable," she says. "She has a good sense of humor—under difficult times, that's been helpful. I can call her on the weekends, on her cell, and she never seems put off by my need to talk to her."

In Clark's role as a hearing officer for the Cook County Commission on Human Rights and Chicago Commission on Human Relations, she hears cases related to discrimination in public accommodation, housing and employment.

Clark enjoys being a fact-finder and learns how to be a better attorney by observing how others handle these situations, she says. One of her first cases involved a limousine company that forced a person with a guide dog to use a private car rather than the shared ride offered to everyone else.

"The issue was can they make somebody with a guide dog have a separate car, even if they allowed them the shared rate?" Clark says. "The way the ordinance is written, the answer is no."

Many Laner Muchin attorneys such as Jennifer A. Naber depend on Clark for support and guidance.

Naber joined Laner Muchin as an associate after leaving the City of Chicago Corporation Counsel's Office in 1997. She calls Clark as a positive person who immediately welcomed her and acted as her mentor in the firm.

"I was impressed that not only was she a woman and an African-American, but also an equity partner in this firm," says Naber, who is now partner. "She's always accessible and willing to help and give great, practical advice—either on a case or advising a client, or in navigating firm life and dealing with other partners and people."

## An Example to Others

*Pay It Forward*, the 2000 film starring Kevin Spacey and Helen Hunt, is Clark's favorite movie.

"What you do for someone else is all that matters in the end," Clark says. "Like I said, one man gave me an opportunity 45 years ago, and it made such a difference. All it took for him was one phone call."

Clark makes it her goal to help other children receive the same opportunity. She serves on the board of the Chicago International Charter Schools, an organization that has 14 campuses in the city and recently opened its 15th campus in Rockford. She also serves on the board of the Daniel Murphy Scholarship Fund, which provides high school students with scholarships to private, parochial and boarding schools.

She developed an interest in tennis and offers the sport as a bridge to better education. In addition to her role as the vice-president of the U.S. Tennis Association/Midwest Section, she started Friends of CICS Tennis, a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to provide tennis opportunities for children at charter schools.

"Tennis can give kids the opportunity to go to school for free," Clark says. "You learn the sport well enough to compete, you learn the life skills, you learn how to be polite, you learn how to persevere, and you learn how to practice hard. All of those are life lessons."

"Some kid from the South Side can go to school for free because they can hit a tennis ball—it doesn't get much better than that."

Clark lives in Hyde Park with her husband, who now manages his own law firm. The couple has three daughters: Adrienne, 27, a fourth-year student at the University of Pittsburgh Medical School; Camille, 23, a revenue management analyst with Jetsetter in New York City; and Gabrielle, 18, a freshman at Emory University in Atlanta.

She loves the diverse, family-based feel of her neighborhood (and the fact that she lives a block from the president's house). She can't imagine living anywhere else.

Clark works to serve others in her personal and professional life, and she hopes that other lawyers recognize the need to do the same, she says.

"I have been blessed with tremendous gifts and with the opportunity to be incredibly successful, professionally, personally and economically," she says. "But, it doesn't mean anything if I don't do anything with it. I want to live my life as an example to others of what a difference even the smallest gift of time or money can make in someone else's life. It made a difference in mine, and I will continue to pay it forward." ■