



November 8th, 2010 | 6:00 am

[Voice of Experience: Brenda T. Dieck, Partner, White & Case](#)

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By Melissa J. Anderson (New York City)

“I love the thrill of negotiating and the satisfaction of closing the deal,” said Brenda T. Dieck, Partner in the New York and Los Angeles Bank Finance Practice Group at the law firm of [White & Case LLP](#). “There are so many interesting puzzles to solve,” she explained.

Currently charged with building the firm’s LA bank finance practice, Dieck said, “It’s a unique opportunity to be part of a well-established practice group in New York, and at the same time, have the opportunity to be somewhat of an entrepreneur in LA, building a complementary team on the West Coast.”

From Cornfields to Global Trotter

“I grew up in a small town in Wisconsin of about 4,000 people,” Dieck said, explaining that the largest industry in her area was farming and a local GM factory that has since been shut down. “I couldn’t wait to see the world,” she explained.

While attending the [University of Wisconsin](#), Dieck had the opportunity to study at [Sophia University](#) in Tokyo and her overseas adventure began. Quickly becoming fluent in Japanese, Dieck took a position with a Japanese non-profit in Yamanashi Prefecture after graduation and became its international programs coordinator focusing on international outreach, development and education. Using Japan as her base, Dieck said she set off to see the world, sometimes only with a back-pack and a guidebook. From elephant rides in Nepal and climbing ancient ruins near Yogyakarta, to learning to barter in Jaipur or relax in Bali, she said she was often a long ways from the cornfields of rural Wisconsin.

After her time in Japan, Dieck attended law school at the [University of Washington](#), focusing on a curriculum of international law. After graduating, she returned to Asia as a Blakemore Fellow to learn how to negotiate and draft legal documents in Japanese, however after a year, the call of

the practice of law beckoned. Brenda explained, “I had been hired by [O’Melveny & Myer’s](#) in Los Angeles but since I was already out in Tokyo I began my legal career there.”

Dieck says one of her proudest professional achievements was to master another language and experience other cultures. “Japanese is a beautiful language and Japan has rich traditions,” she said. “I had the opportunity to study classical literature, tea ceremony and kimono. It was so completely different than what I grew up with, that I was hooked by the adventure.”

Dieck credited her curiosity and supportive parents for her success. She explained, “I feel privileged to have achieved what I have with my career. Not everyone I grew up with had the opportunities that I have been blessed with. My mother raised me to believe that the world had no boundaries. Nothing was impossible. My father claims to have just gotten out of my way, but I know he did more than that.”

The Markets are Back

Dieck recently joined White & Case as a partner in the firm’s Bank Finance Practice Group. Splitting her time between Los Angeles and New York, Dieck said, “I just joined a fantastic platform for what I do – bank finance, particularly leveraged acquisition finance – which is, basically, the buying and selling companies with borrowed money. So it’s a real privilege to be part of such a strong team of partners and associates who are helping me expand our practice in Los Angeles.”

She continued, “Our bank finance team is completely integrated globally. The group really has its finger on the pulse of market changes. We are busy – the markets are still choppy, but it’s good to see financial activity out there after a rough couple of years in the financial markets,” she added.

Women in Finance

“There are not a lot of us in finance – I would like to see more women stay in the industry.” Dieck remarked, “We will all hit some kind of glass ceiling at some point in our careers. I learned if I couldn’t break through it, sometimes you get the same results if you go to the next room. It’s really about channeling what can be a frustrating experience into ways to take control of your career,” she said.

Dieck explained that taking control of one’s career in law is much about “constantly building your reputation and cultivating relationships. It’s what, to me, business development is all about.” She is proud of the relationships she has built with her clients. “I’ve been able to become a trusted advisor to many of my clients for high stakes deals, which is very rewarding professionally – more so than any particular transaction or accomplishment.”

Dieck is also an active member of the [Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles](#) and a member of the [LA Joint Task Force on the Retention and Promotion of Women in Law](#). Dieck stated, “Over the last few years, I have seen women’s initiatives evolve, contract, and change purpose and political positioning. We originally focused on programs, policies and best practices

but despite this success, the numbers of women in leadership at big firms have a long way to go. As each law firm defines and re-defines our initiatives, many of us have found the cross-firm Joint Task Force forum invaluable to share our successes, our mistakes and our vision with thought leaders outside our respective firms.”

“I am optimistic that things will change for the next generation of lawyers coming through. As we see more and more women in law firm leadership, the culture of leadership will change,” Dieck added.

Advice for Women in Law

She said that women who want to be leaders should work to portray themselves as leaders throughout their career. She relayed some advice her mentor once told her – “If you want to be a leader, act like a leader. If you want to make partner, start acting like a partner. You are only as good as you are perceived to be. You need to step up and act as you would like to be perceived.”

Dieck shared a few thoughts of advice for women who are beginning careers in the law profession. “One of the things I really believe in is mentors, but don’t just find one. Build your own “board of directors” to advise you over time and make sure to share your success. They can be people at your firm, your peers, the elderly statesmen type... Having those advisors has been invaluable to me,” she said.

She continued, “Also find your professional voice early and be comfortable in your skin. Stay true to yourself, but be strategic – network and be generous. Find out what it is about practice of law that you love. Life is too short not to enjoy what you do.”

When asked about how she balances the every day demands of a high pressure legal career with her personal commitments, Dieck said she sees work/life balance as part of an ongoing, long-term cycle. Sometimes, she said, when you are in the heat of the deal work can be “all consuming,” but “you also have to learn to appreciate down time.” She continued, “It helps to build strong support teams around you both at work and in your personal life – so you can cover for each other, create efficiencies, pick your battles, and still do top notch legal work for your clients while showing up for a family event on time.”

“Surround yourself with good people and a great team. Learn to delegate and forgive yourself when you don’t strike that perfect balance.”

In her spare time, Dieck said, she enjoys traveling. “I’m quite entertaining to eat sushi with,” she joked. “I love salsa dancing and I am restoring a turn of the century Craftsman home to all its historical glory. I also like scuba diving and just returned from swimming with the sharks in Bora Bora – I’m quite an adventurer when I can break away. I am getting used to swimming with the sharks, even on land,” she joked.