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AN UNEXPECTED TURN

Jason L. Brown

BY PATRICK FOLLIARD

Jason Brown never anticipated one of the stops along his legal career would include leading a nonprofit trade association. During his teenage years, the Twin Cities native imagined himself securing a spot on the United States Supreme Court. His goal was to become the next Thurgood Marshall. “It began with a civics assignment in high school. I became thoroughly obsessed with all things Marshall,” he recalls.

Last October, Brown was named executive director of the National Association of Minority and Women Owned Law Firms (NAMWOLF). Even though his new position isn’t on the Supreme Court, he could not be happier.

Established in 2001, NAMWOLF’s purpose is to encourage major corporations and public entities to utilize the services of minority- and women-owned law firms. Launched with only a handful of member firms from across the country, today NAMWOLF boasts ninety-five member firms and 150 corporate and public entity partners who agree to spend at least five percent of their outside legal budget on participating firms.

Brown is passionate about his work, and while he has never been part of a minority- or women-owned firm himself, he brings a wealth of pertinent experience to his new position. Previously, he was the director of legal affairs at PepsiAmericas, Inc., and he includes litigation, risk management, government relations, as well as corporate compliance and fraud, among his areas of expertise. Seven plus years with the international company equipped Brown with a keen understanding of what is expected from outside counsel as well as a firm grasp on how to build the type of relationships corporate legal departments are seeking.

“I’m acutely aware of how to go about making the argument for our firms and to persuade different corporations about why they should be a part of the NAMWOLF mission,” he says. Having worked as corporate litigator at Winthrop & Weinstine in Minneapolis, and Ungaretti & Harris in Chicago, Brown also is well acquainted with billable hours and the struggles firms face in getting on the radar screens of major corporations.

“The opportunity to head an organization whose goal is diversity in the legal profession seems uniquely tailored to me,” he says. “It’s an excellent fit.”

A NAMWOLF board member since 2007, Brown came to his new position with an understanding of the organization. NAMWOLF members are vetted for references and respectability within the profession. In addition, each firm must employ at least three, full-time employees; possess a Martindale Hubble AV rating; and demonstrate a history of doing the work that the association’s partners demand, preferably with Fortune 1000 companies. Given the opportunity, Brown says, NAMWOLF’s members prove themselves to be on par with majority-owned firms.

Many corporations and public employers express inter-

est in achieving diversity. Brown's goal is to help them realize that aspiration. "A lot of companies seek diversity through outside counsel exclusively drawn from larger, majority-owned firms, often to the exclusion of those owned by minorities and women. Frankly, this model isn't working very well—diversity has shown less than impressive growth at large firms over the last 20 years. While the numbers and size of majority firms may be enticing, true diversity is only achieved when our corporate partners develop long-lasting relationships with participating, truly diverse firms."

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Since assuming the NAMWOLF directorship, Brown has focused on improving its infrastructure and becoming better acquainted with the organization's back office. Twice weekly, he commutes from his home in Chicago to NAMWOLF's Milwaukee headquarters. Much of his time is spent on the phone and in meetings with corporate partners and member firms working to strengthen existing relationships and to formulate

strategies that will make the organization increasingly useful and visible.

While Brown appreciates the symbolic value that being an African American lawyer brings to his new position, he rejects the notion that the attribute is a requirement. "A trade association with a focus on diversity requires a person with leadership and vision to push it forward—a specific demographic isn't the most important quality," he says. Nonetheless, he admits that his combination of his personal and career experience afford him invaluable insights. "I can identify with the experience and the struggle. From a personal

perspective I understand how frustrating and real it is that there are individuals out there who believe that minorities and women aren't capable of doing the work. I've been underestimated in private practice, my abilities discounted based on how I looked when

I entered the room. On that same note, I can tell that they didn't feel the same way when I left the room."

Thurgood Marshall continues to inspire Brown. "Because he was the first in so many respects, Marshall had to possess extreme confidence, strength of character and—particularly at the time—a lot of humility too," Brown says. "He serves as an example to me and to so many in the legal profession."

Like Marshall, Brown is a Howard

University School of Law alumnus (class of 1998). Throughout law school and his career, he has relied on mentors—of various racial and cultural backgrounds—to give him a nudge in the right direction. "I have a history of making people my mentors before they realize it," he says with a chuckle. "I've always looked to people who were doing what I wanted to be doing or more skilled in an area that I was currently focused on at the time. Over the years, I've had more than one mentor whom I've leaned on for a variety of things, both personal and professional."

In his new position, Brown will now have a turn to serve and to inspire others. His decision to pursue the NAMWOLF executive directorship emerged rather serendipitously. At the time, PepsiAmericas was in the process of merging with PepsiCo and The Pepsi Bottling Group, and was moving its headquarters to New York. Brown needed to decide whether to relocate his family halfway across the country, or look for a new job. After some thought, he decided on the latter.

Soon after at a NAMWOLF board meeting called specifically to discuss the hiring of the association's first-ever executive director, it dawned on Brown that he was the right lawyer for the job. Not only did he have enthusiasm for the organization's mission, but he also possessed the required strong desire to advocate and to lead. The rest of the board members agreed.

Today, Brown sees himself as the natural choice to lead NAMWOLF into the next decade. "Sometimes my career has a way of unfolding all on its own. Once again, it has put me in the exact place where I need to be." **D&B**

Patrick Folliard is a freelance writer based in Silver Spring, Md.