

How I Made Practice Group Co-Chair: 'Truly Care,' Says Katie Gates Calderon of Shook, Hardy & Bacon

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By Tasha Norman

Katie Gates Calderon, 42; Shook, Hardy & Bacon, Kansas City.

Job title: Practice group co-chair.

Practice area: Product liability litigation.

Law school and year of graduation: I graduated from the University of Kansas School of Law in 2007, my undergraduate degree is from Harvard, magna cum laude, in 2002.

How long have you been at the firm? Fifteen years. I started at Shook right out of law school in 2007. I was promoted to partner in 2015. I was appointed co-chair of the Product Liability Litigation Practice Group in 2022.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm to promote you to your current role? It was likely a combination of factors. I am the relationship partner for a core firm client, and the co-chair of our Food, Beverage, and Agribusiness Practice Group. These roles entail both substantive work and

managing a large team of lawyers and professional staff, and each role provides critical insight into firm processes and personnel. That insight increased exponentially when I was elected to the firm's Executive Committee in 2018. In these and other firm leadership roles, I've been deeply fortunate to develop relationships with mentors, mentees, friends and collaborators at all levels across the firm. I view those relationships as the most important factor in my ability to lead the Product Liability Litigation Practice Group with my law partners Bill Geraghty and Hildy Sastre.

What's the key to successful business development in your opinion? The key to impactful business development is leveraging personal and professional relationships to foster opportunities and, more importantly, identifying the right people and teams to put in front of a client or send to a pitch. After



Katie Gates Calderon of Shook, Hardy & Bacon.

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our talented lawyers and professional staff, Shook's greatest asset is the collaborative approach we take to servicing clients. When a client makes a request or we're invited to pitch for business, we excel at setting aside egos and identifying the folks whose talents and experiences will best serve the client's needs. The key to keeping clients and expanding Shook's role is simple: Truly care. In practice that

looks like responding ASAP when a client reaches out and making your clients' problems your own. In-house counsel can sense when they're dealing with an attorney or firm who operates this way, and we pride ourselves on maintaining that level of service.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your current role? Three Shooks played (and continue to play) important roles in the progression of my career. Early on, Marty Warren, now retired, led the Global Products Liability Group at Shook and was the relationship partner for key clients. She was a smart, strategic leader who knew people's talents and limitations in staffing teams and managing huge pieces of work. She was tough but fair.

Walt Cofer, recently retired and previous Product Liability Litigation Practice Group leader, is another big influence. Walt is my mentor and friend, and he taught me innumerable big and small lessons about being an inclusive leader, serving on the Executive Committee and running the practice group. Walt embodies work hard, play hard: he always looked like he was having the most fun (and I don't dispute it), but in reality he worked harder than anyone. Even so, he always

gave credit to others and prioritized the development of associates and junior partners. There was nothing more challenging or fun than going to a "Walt trial," and he remains amongst the best trial lawyers I've ever seen in action.

Finally, our current firm chair, Madeleine McDonough, is the ultimate strategist. She knows how the pieces fit together in our organization and industry and how to motivate our attorneys and professional staff to get outside our comfort zones and be our best. Madeleine sees the whole chess board, is always 10 steps ahead and works tirelessly to support our firm's initiatives. She leads by example and my perspective has deepened tenfold for it.

What's the best piece of advice you could give to a partner who is interested in leading a practice group? First, it's critical to learn how your firm or organization works outside of the bounds of your practice group or team. Every partner should invest the time it takes to learn the firm's strategic goals, internal structure and personnel and differing approaches to client service in various sectors. I can't emphasize enough how crucial it is for all employees, but especially partners, to understand their firm's finances and balance sheets. Balance sheets



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reflect a firm's challenges, successes, and reasons for its strategic goals. Second, great leaders know there are things they don't know, understand, or necessarily have visibility to. Keeping that mindset allows for thoughtful conversations, growth, and engagements—which ultimately result in more collaborative, integrated, and thoughtful leadership.

Knowing what you know now, would you do anything differently?

I can think of many, many things I did wrong or wish I'd done better, but the lessons I learned, especially the hard ones, formed the foundation of my career and professional philosophy. The bumps in the road have been worth it, as I feel lucky every day when I walk into the Shook building and reflect on having found this firm and the friends I have here. Being promoted to practice group leader is the icing on the cake.

What three terms would you use to describe your work mindset?

Take your work and clients seriously.—But don't take yourself too

seriously. When I interviewed at Shook as a 3L, I candidly had no intention of being a lifer. But now, 15 years later, when I try to put a finger on why I love this firm, it always comes back to the fact that I work with attorneys and professional staff who embrace this mantra.

To everything there is a season.—I tell this to lawyers expecting their first child, to colleagues navigating a parent's need for more support and everyone in between. We work very hard at Shook, but there is also a time to step back and enjoy a new baby, care for a parent, go on vacation, coach a kid's team or take time for yourself. It's my version of endorsing the importance of work-life-balance.

Embrace challenges.—We work with sophisticated, high-level clients who rightfully have high expectations. Overall, we enjoy a relatively balanced lifestyle at Shook, but there will be days, weeks and maybe months where we have to work harder and longer on more difficult projects. There is a lot of solidarity and comradery in working on a team with a common goal like a trial, so I think of this mantra when I need to remember that there is a light at the end of the tunnel,

and stretching my brain will pay dividends in professional growth. The sense of personal accomplishment I feel after working through difficult issues or projects is satisfying beyond measure.

What firm or office initiatives are you working on, and what impact do you hope to achieve? Diversity, equity and inclusion is always front-of-mind at Shook. While we have been proactive in our day-to-day initiatives for decades, Shook earned the Mansfield Rule Certification 5.0 for the first time in 2022. With measurable steps, as well as those that are less quantifiable, we keep our commitment to DE&I moving forward. In terms of my more specific contributions:

Project Affirmation—I am lucky to work with passionate attorneys like Mary Olson who runs Shook's Project Affirmation, a pro bono name change and gender marker amendment clinic serving the transgender community in and around Kansas City.

Honorable Judge Jon Gray Leadership Academy—I am a formal mentor for one of the talented associates participating in this academy, which is a two-year mentorship and development program for diverse senior associates and junior partners to

support their trajectories into leading service for key clients. In 2022, our first class of fellows graduated from the program, which is named after a former Missouri judge, now partner at our firm, who was (and continues to be) a real trailblazer in our community.

Search Committee—I've served on the Search Committee for nearly 10 years, including five years chairing and running the summer program. Diversity, equity and inclusion is a core component of our recruiting philosophy, as well as a compass for the decisions we make as a committee.

Informal DE&I Mentor—The role I value most is an informal one. Being a dedicated ally and providing a safe space for lawyers and professional staff to voice their thoughts has allowed me to keep a finger on the pulse of our DE&I successes, as well as hurdles we still need to navigate. My commitment is to walk the walk of our DE&I mission, and a big part of that is using my position of influence to make sure all voices are not only heard but considered, especially those from vulnerable communities. I'm grateful that Shook prioritizes DE&I and continually works toward a more inclusive work environment for all.