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How I Made Partner: 'I Demonstrated an Eagerness to Develop a Dynamic Practice That Could Evolve Over Time,' Says Michelle Chen of Sullivan & Cromwell

"Show that you are interested not just in the assignment of today, but in being a leader in a field that will change in ways large and small throughout your career."

By Tasha Norman

Michelle Chen, 35, Sullivan & Cromwell, Washington, D.C.

Practice area: Bank regulatory, financial services mergers & acquisitions, and investment management.

Law school and year of graduation: Columbia Law School, 2012.

How long have you been at the firm? Nine and a half years. I was a summer associate and then an associate at Sullivan & Cromwell's New York office. I relocated to [the firm's] Washington, D.C., office at the beginning of 2022. I made partner in 2021.

What's the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming a partner? The biggest surprise was how many of the defining characteristics of my time at S&C remained constant, while at the same time transforming in subtle, yet significant ways. From my first year as an associate, I would routinely work on matters spanning a variety of practices, reflecting both S&C's generalist approach as well as the fact that I was eager to work on different types of projects—regulatory, transactional, other advisory, and so on. I was constantly learning and discovering how my work on one type of matter made me a stronger, more capable lawyer handling a different type of matter. My work on regulatory matters gave me valuable insights on transactions, and my work on securities offerings made me a stronger M&A lawyer.

When I became a partner, I continued to see the breadth of my practice expand, and the benefits of a multidisciplinary practice. But the reasons were slightly different. As an associate, many of the new opportunities arose through relationships I had developed with other lawyers at the firm and with clients. As a partner, that is still true, but I also see, to a greater degree, the importance of being proactive—not just being ready to assist our clients on their legal issues as they arise, but anticipating what those issues will be and letting them know that we will be here to guide them through. The transition from associate to partner is largely a continuation of the work I knew, with shifts in emphasis and new perspectives.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you a partner? I think overall it was the relationships I had built with other lawyers at the firm and clients over many years, including those I'd worked with since my first days at the firm and those I'd worked with as a senior associate. Being a lawyer involves both technical abilities as well as the interpersonal skills to be a trusted adviser, particularly on significant, complex and time-sensitive matters. Strong relationships speak to both.

Michelle Chen
Courtesy Photo

I also benefited from the parallel paths of my career and changes in the financial services industry. I started practicing shortly after the enactment of the Dodd-Frank Act. The early part of my career included a significant focus on regulatory matters. As industry and market trends evolved, I started working on more transactional matters as I transitioned into a midlevel and then senior associate role. New opportunities arose, and I demonstrated an eagerness to work on new types of matters and develop a dynamic practice that could evolve over time.

Describe how you feel about your career now that you've made partner.

Excited and fortunate to be working with a group of smart and supporting colleagues, with the opportunity to help grow existing practices and build entirely new ones, and support the careers of the next generation of lawyers.

As an associate, I found that the focus was typically on near-term goals: preparing an excellent analysis of a legal issue, drafting thoughtful transaction agreements tailored to a client's business objectives, advocating a particular issue on behalf of a client, and so on. All those focuses remain present in my career today. But they are complemented with a long-term, strategic focus: what can I do to make sure that clients continue to look to us for their novel and most significant legal issues? It's exciting, it's challenging and it's rewarding.

Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to your younger self? *I would tell myself not to worry about specialization, even if that's the trend elsewhere, and enjoy the rewards, challenges, and opportunities of a broad, multidisciplinary practice.*

What's the key to successful business development in your opinion and how do you grow professionally while everyone is working remotely? The key is recognizing that every moment is a business development opportunity. The work today is business development for the work of tomorrow. A colleague today could be a client tomorrow. There are some activities that are more heavily geared toward practice development, such as participating in conferences or publishing articles. But in the end, clients are looking for a trusted adviser, and every interaction with current clients, with colleagues or with others is an opportunity to demonstrate the capabilities people look for in their counsel.

Although the pandemic and working remotely have made in-person interactions more difficult, new technology, such as virtual meeting tools, have offered many new opportunities for people to connect in an efficient way. I think the shared experience of having to adjust to remote working quickly also helps make the transition more smooth than it otherwise would have been.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to a partner? I am fortunate to have worked with many exceptional lawyers who've guided me in my career but some standouts include S&C partners Bill Farrar, Camille Orme, Don Toumey, Mark Menting, Mitch Eitel and Rodge Cohen. I've worked closely with Bill from day one at S&C, and he's taught me from early on about how to be an effective lawyer, from substantive aspects of the Investment Company Act to keys to client service. Camille has shared invaluable insights about her path to partnership and career, which helped me focus on the bigger picture at critical junctures. Don is a great mentor and played a significant role in helping me build my practice and client relationships. Mark has shown me the importance of seeing issues from a business person's perspective and communicating advice in ways that resonate with both lawyers and nonlawyers. Mitch was instrumental in my recent relocation to D.C. And I have learned so much about strategy, advocacy and client service from working closely with Rodge, S&C's senior chair.

What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner? Show a commitment to clients and intellectual interest in the law. This is not just a question of working hard or being responsive, though those are, of course, very important. A commitment to clients means not just responding to their questions, but being proactive and looking for opportunities to assist clients before they ask. The legal and regulatory framework continually evolves, and partnership is a multidecade career opportunity. Show that you are interested not just in the

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assignment of today, but in being a leader in a field that will change in ways large and small throughout your career.

What challenges did you face and had to overcome in your career path? As a young professional, there is constant pressure to demonstrate strength, expertise and competence. It can be intimidating to ask for assistance. The most important lesson I learned is the importance of consultation and promoting a culture of collaboration. Consultation helps with the particular question any lawyer may be facing. But it is much more than that. It's a key ingredient in a culture of collaboration which, in turn, instills the right values and work habits in our newest lawyers, makes the practice of law more educational and interesting, promotes teamwork, brings different perspectives and makes expertise across the firm readily available to assist our clients.

What lessons, if any, did you learn in 2020/2021 (the years of COVID-19). The pandemic has taught me the importance of adapting and finding opportunities in challenging situations. I had a child (my first) in New York City in the middle of March 2020, right as the city entered its first "lockdown." I will not sugarcoat it: it was challenging! But eventually, the challenging situation presented opportunities. Through remote work, the widespread adoption of new technologies, and the support of S&C and my colleagues here, I realized I had a unique opportunity to spend time with my infant (now toddler!) child to a degree that would not be possible in the pre-COVID era, while also continuing to practice full time as a senior associate and then partner.