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Paula Estrada de Martin Combines Science and Law to Make a Difference

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November 20, 2015

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Baker Donelson attorney Paula Estrada de Martin checks all the right boxes for diversity in corporate America. With a family heritage based in Mexico, her "Hispanic/Latino" status is unquestionable. This alone qualifies her for the generalized category of "diverse" in the American business lexicon. However, Dr. Estrada de Martin's diversity extends far beyond the surveys and checkboxes often considered identifiers for diverse lawyers. What truly makes Estrada de Martin diverse is her personal history and the unique experiences through which she became who and what she is today.

Estrada de Martin was born and raised in Southern California, near Los Angeles. She discovered her passion for science at an early age and pursued it vigorously, earning both Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Biology from California State University San Bernardino. Her desire to continue in the biology field resulted in a PhD from Yale University, where she received her Doctorate in 2004. According to Estrada de Martin, the decision to attend law school after a PhD "kind of happened by accident." She originally accepted a job as a post-doctoral research fellow at Weill Cornell Medical School in New York City and was on the verge of submitting a grant proposal when she got a call from a recruiter who brought law into her line of sight. In making the decision between academia and law, Estrada de Martin realized that patent law would afford her more numerous and interesting learning opportunities, what she refers to as "the thrill of patent law," as well as the ability to expand beyond a singular niche of the scientific field. From there, Estrada de Martin was hired as a scientific advisor, where she worked for a law firm in the life sciences and biotechnology areas. A year into her new job, Estrada de Martin went into New York Law School's four-year evening program formulated for working patent agents like herself. She received her Juris Doctor, cum laude, from NYLS in 2010. She and her husband moved to New Orleans and Estrada de Martin joined Baker Donelson in September 2014 as a life sciences and biotechnology patent attorney.

With role models like Marie Curie, it seems only fitting that Estrada de Martin has worked so hard to accomplish aggressive goals in both science and law. She highlights Curie's successes as a scientist and, more specifically, as a woman scientist as a personal motivating force. Curie's ability to break down barriers and achieve above and beyond are traits that Estrada de Martin has carried into her life and career. One barrier that she continually overcomes is the one between the scientists and the lawyers with whom she works. She has the unique ability to flow easily between the two environments, able to both speak to and understand the scientists' vocabularies.

While Estrada de Martin's uncommon background in the world of science has immensely bolstered her legal career, she says she never really considered it as non-traditional. She came to combine science and law as a patent attorney through real life experiences that allowed her to utilize various skills and maintain her interests in both fields. Her diverse passions led her along a one-of-a-kind career path while remaining true to herself.

Another benefit to Estrada de Martin's variegated past is the network she has built, which ranges from friends and colleagues to professors and former bosses. She advises young lawyers in the beginning of their careers, "Make contacts, maintain them, keep them. You just don't know what type of opportunities will come of that."

She recommends using social networking sites like Facebook to help cultivate relationships with people with whom one may not often interact in person. She admits, "I Facebook like crazy! You can post pictures and statuses, and keep up with other people who do the same. It's an easy way to stay updated." However, she is quick to emphasize the need to be responsible with social platforms and monitor the types of information shared. She makes an effort to remember the interests of people in her network, and forwards related articles she happens upon that may appeal to them. She recommends this personalized approach as a great way to reach out, when one hasn't been in touch in a while.

When Estrada de Martin isn't making incredible strides in her career, she enjoys home life in her newly-claimed city of New Orleans with her husband, her beagle and five cats. Their current project is renovating their "shotgun house," a traditional post-Civil War style of Southern architecture common to the area. The family loves to spend time in their backyard – a huge change from New York City life – and stroll through the New Orleans neighborhoods. Harboring hidden hearts for history, Estrada de Martin and her husband are also part of the Irish Channel Community Association, which preserves historic homes and landmarks. She was also recently invited to join the "Krewe of Nyx," an all-female parade group, which takes part in Mardi Gras festivities and raises money for many different philanthropies.

Not only is she a "diverse" lawyer due to her heritage, but Estrada de Martin also exhibits further diversity through a unique background comprised of her educational, geographical and personal pursuits. She remarks, "In California and New York, there were all kinds of diversity, all places, always. Cultural diversity was 'in your face' all the time. Here in New Orleans, diversity is definitely present, but it's kind of on the sidelines; people don't really pick it up or point it out. A lot of the diversity you find is not as blatant and you really have to get to know someone to see it." Diversity for Estrada de Martin is much more than surface level qualities, and she looks for the same in others.

Estrada de Martin has been with Baker Donelson for just over a year, and finds her own appreciation for diversity mirrored in the Firm's deep-rooted culture. She observes that her "old firm was a big firm that touted diversity and 'made waves,' but [she] never really saw anything come of it. Here, the effort is much more concerted and much more comes out of it." Estrada de Martin shares, "I have felt much more comfortable here. The Firm culture at Baker Donelson is exactly what I want it to be. It's also very different from my old firm – the Firm's focus on diversity issues really matters to folks here." Estrada de Martin exemplifies many of the different kinds of diversity that the Firm aims to promote daily, and reminds us all that diversity should be more than just a checkbox.