



THE NEW ELLIS GROUP

Monday Monday

Connecting the Dots with Karen Kaplowitz



*Helping you create and reinforce the habits of successful career building,
gleaned from my work as a business development strategist, trainer and coach*

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What is Your Superpower?

The civil rights movement of the 60s inspired me and many others to go to law school. I arrived in Chicago to attend the University of Chicago Law School one day after the 1968 Democratic Convention ended with protests and police brutality. I started law school feeling powerless but soon understood that being trained as a lawyer was being handed a powerful set of tools including Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which was originally intended solely for race discrimination. Sex discrimination had been an afterthought. When law firms recruiting on campus discriminated blatantly against women law students, my classmates challenged the law school under Title VII for failing to bar those firms from recruiting on campus. One of the leaders of the group, Aviva Futorian, had been a courageous civil rights worker for two years in Mississippi. For nearly 50 years, I have had the privilege of channeling a lot of anger at injustice through the power of the law and the legal community. But I never had my life or safety on the line. #BlackLivesMatter. If you are looking for ways to promote racial justice, here are some questions to consider:

- With lawyers of color still vastly underrepresented in US firms, are you helping to build a pipeline of lawyers of color? For example, does your firm participate in the Leadership Council for Legal Diversity's [1L Scholars Program](#)? Have you questioned your alma mater on its student body diversity or dedicated alumni donations to support scholarships for diverse law students? Have you helped your alma mater recruit diverse college students?
- In your law firm, have you actively mentored or sponsored lawyers of color? Do you provide them with good assignments, candid feedback, and opportunities to network and get visibility with clients and in the community?
- When lawyers of color leave your firm, do you ask them what you could have done better?
- Is part of your pro bono work devoted to racial justice?
- When you observe unfairness, do you speak up or take action?

As lawyers, we have been trained to communicate, advocate, intervene and confront injustice. We are also part of powerful institutions which can wield enormous influence and cause change. Can you be more of an "upstander" than a bystander, an activist and not just an observer?

Example: In the early 70s, I was an associate at O'Melveny & Myers in Los Angeles, one of the first women lawyers in the firm. I was assigned to a major bankruptcy matter representing the trustee of a life insurance company that had created, bundled, and resold phony life insurance policies. The case was assigned to a Bankruptcy Judge, now deceased, in the Central District of California. One day, after I appeared in the Bankruptcy Judge's courtroom, he called the senior partner at the firm on the matter, Everett "Bud" Clary, to complain that the firm had sent a woman lawyer to his courtroom. The firm did not accede to the judge's pressure to take me off the case. Instead, Bud Clary contacted the District Court Judge who oversaw the matter, Harry Pregerson, and informed him of the Bankruptcy Judge's demand. Judge Pregerson intervened and I remained on the case. I have always been grateful that Bud Clary took a risk in resisting the Bankruptcy Judge's sexist demand and intervened on my behalf with Judge Pregerson.

I applaud the many courageous current actions by law firms and lawyers, such as [Cooley's compilation](#) of allyship and anti-racism resources; Seyfarth's launch of [The Belonging Project](#); Tiffani Lee of Holland & Knight's [Law360 article](#) on fighting racism; and [Paul Weiss's call](#) for a law firm coalition to fight for racial justice.

What opportunities do you have to exercise your skills, your institutional power, and your empathy to advance racial justice? What are your superpowers that you can bring to bear on the stark reality of racial injustice?