

# Coach Kaplowitz Does What it Takes To Teach

By **STEPHANIE FRANCIS CAHILL**

One of the things Karen Kaplowitz is known for at Alschuler Grossman & Pines — other than her career as a successful employment partner — is giving the high-five sign to people she passes in the hallway. She describes her job as coaching, both clients and other lawyers, especially associates and junior partners.

"I'm a coach about how to get things done and how to get it done effectively. The high-fives just kind of come naturally," she says. She was fortunate to have many "coaches" in her legal career, she says, beginning in 1971 at O'Melveny & Myers. Ms. Kaplowitz was the third woman hired by O'Melveny, which encouraged her to be independent, though partners were there for support when needed.

"Independence by itself isn't enough when you're a brand new lawyer. You need to have somebody who will help you learn the ropes [and] make decisions," she explains. "There were a couple of [O'Melveny] partners who gave me a lot of responsibility," she says, but "they [also] gave me a lot of help."

She's also known as someone willing to take on challenges — even those that may seem quixotic to others. While a student at the University of Chicago School of Law, she sued the school for allowing law firms that discriminated against women to recruit on campus. Because of

her experiences as a woman lawyer in the early '70s — a time when women were first entering the legal profession in significant numbers — she feels she relates well to the concerns and frustrations many minority lawyers have today.

"There weren't a lot of us, we were always dealing in situations in which we were the only one of our kind in a meeting. I definitely identify with what it's like to be a minority entering the legal field," says Ms. Kaplowitz. She uses those experiences to counsel one of the attorneys that she mentors, Johnnie A. James, a fifth-year-associate at the firm who is black.

Mr. James, who is very concerned about the issues that minority attorneys face, says that he and Ms. Kaplowitz talk about the subject all the time.

"Karen is an advocate for increasing the number of minorities at a law firm," he says. "We talked very recently about not just what we could do to bring them in, but then how to keep them here," he continued. He recently spoke with a group of minority law students, and told them that it was best for a minority lawyer to start at a small firm, such as Alschuler, as opposed to a large firm, because their efforts at the small firm would be more easily recognized.

Much like her experiences at O'Melveny, Ms. Kaplowitz gives the attorneys that she mentors many responsibilities. She also makes a point to be available when they have questions. Mr. James,



MARK ROBERT HALPER

**HIGH-FIVE** — Karen Kaplowitz, a partner at Alschuler, Grossman & Pines, considers herself a "coach" to mentees such as senior associate Johnnie James.

for one, appreciates that method of mentoring.

"I will take a case from start to finish. If I need her, she's there. Otherwise the case is mine," he says of Ms. Kaplowitz, adding that it is rare for a partner to give as much responsibility to associates as she does.

The first case that Ms. Kaplowitz let Mr. James "take and run with" was the defense of a breach-of-contract claim.

"I did all the negotiations with the other side. I did all the motion practice, argued the motions — I was a second-year associate at the time, so that was pretty significant," he says. "Karen was always there. We had strategy sessions before I would go off and do battle."

Besides giving Mr. James serious responsibility in cases that she has super-

vised, she also helps him garner speaking engagements, and she co-authors articles with him in legal journals. Mr. James also believes that she has taught him some excellent litigation skills.

"I've learned how to negotiate in a very nice way to get what I want for my clients," he says, adding that Ms. Kaplowitz is very aggressive, yet very subtle. "Instead of being a ball-busting, nasty, stereotypical male lawyer, she instead is very subtle, but she will not let up. She tends to get the other side to like her. That's very effective."

Both Ms. Kaplowitz and Mr. James believe that their firm does a great job mentoring younger attorneys. Besides Ms. Kaplowitz, Mr. James also cites as his mentors partner Michael Cypers and name partner

# Kaplowitz

Marshall Grossman, who is also one of Ms. Kaplowitz's mentors.

"What I've seen in this firm is generations of mentors," she explains. "Marshall was a mentor to me. I, in turn, was a mentor to others."

Having a good mentor is essential to having a successful law practice, says Ms. Kaplowitz. "I would say that probably for all the people who have succeeded, they've all had mentors. If you have good mentors, you make it," she says.

Besides senior attorneys making a point of actively mentoring younger attorneys, it's also important for younger attorneys to look for mentors, she points out.

"I think it really is a two-way street, and that people who have mentors are often people who seek them out, and who appreciate them," she says. "It's not just that people get lucky and find mentors, or have mentors who find them. People who want those kind of relationships encourage them."

While mentors often give advice about

complex legal matters, Ms. Kaplowitz believes that they can also help foster common sense. Another of her mentors, Blanche C. Bersch, was a name partner with Ms. Kaplowitz at Bardeen, Bersch & Kaplowitz — one of the earliest attempts at forming an all-woman firm. At the time, 1974, Ms. Bersch had been working at the attorney general's office for six years, and had three more years of legal experience than Ms. Kaplowitz.

"She taught us practical things as well as professional things," Ms. Kaplowitz says, explaining that Ms. Bersch was older than she was, had three children, and more life experience. "These kind of relationships can focus on simple mundane things as well as more intellectual or business-oriented things."

Mr. James, who was 8 when Ms. Kaplowitz began her legal career at O'Melveny, says he wants to emulate her legal career, because he feels she has a great amount of energy and is very well respected by her clients. And he has been very happy under her wing.

"She's very nurturing. In a way she's like a mother-figure," he says. "She wants you to do well, and she's willing to do whatever it takes to get you there."