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Merging Environmental Safety and Incident Response Teams: Meet Nadira Clarke, Lily Chinn, and Scott Janoe



Nadira Clarke, Lily Chinn, and Scott Janoe

Just over a year ago, ELI Leadership Council members Nadira Clarke, Lily Chinn, and Scott Janoe joined forces at Baker Botts. It's not by coincidence that the trio now work together in the firm's Environmental Safety & Incident Response Section. These three litigators made it their priority to seek out others who they admire and like working with. "We are deliberate about who we want to work with. We seek out people with similar energy, drive, and perspective. It makes our practice fun," mentions Nadira.

Nadira—elected to ELI's Board of Directors this June—grew up in Berkeley, California. Influenced by her parents who were city planners, she developed an interest in land use and property issues at UC Berkeley Law School. After working in the Environment & Natural Resources Division (ENRD) through the U.S. Department of Justice's Honors Program, she met Lily at a San Francisco law firm: Nadira, an associate, and Lily, a 2L summer associate.

Lily, also from California, has had a long-standing interest in environmental issues that started back in high school, where she was a member of the Model UN club. Before meeting Nadira, she had never considered working in government. But that summer experience changed the course of her legal career when Nadira urged her to apply to the DOJ's Honors Program. Lily took her advice and ultimately started as an ENRD trial attorney after graduation from UCLA Law School.

"Starting all the way back at the Justice Department, I learned that the greatest joy is finding people that you enjoy being with and working

with, and then, if you can add on to that, people who you admire, you can do just about anything. In my career, I have worked hard to find those people, and then, I do my darndest to figure out how to keep working with them." —Nadira

When Nadira started at DOJ, she was one of only a handful of minority attorneys in the ENRD. In the Clinton Administration, Assistant Attorney General Lois J. Schiffer established a task force to increase minority recruitment and retention. On that task force, Nadira met Steve Solow, and the two of them, with unrelenting support from AAG Schiffer, successfully grew the number of women and minorities in ENRD. One of the lawyers recruited to ENRD was Lily.

"It's important to ask: Is this encouraging not just diversity, but also inclusiveness? You can get people there, but if they are not welcome or feel like they are not a part of something, they are not going to stay," Lily points out. "Once we recruited diverse attorneys, we made sure that they felt welcome and that they were assigned to quality cases, trials, and other important opportunities, whether at DOJ or private practice" Nadira adds.

Eight years later, they left government to focus on criminal matters and white-collar workplace safety projects in private practice. In this sphere of crisis response work, they met Scott.

Scott grew up in a working-class family in New Orleans; his dad was a roughneck in the oil industry, and his mom was a secretary at LSU. "I didn't come from a background where a lot of folks had college degrees

and certainly not graduate degrees,” Scott says. Despite this, a cousin he admired introduced him to the field of environmental law. At Harvard Law School, he concentrated on administrative and environmental law courses, subsequently joining Baker Botts in Houston shortly after graduation.

Throughout the years, Nadira, Lily, and Scott had opportunities to work together on civil and criminal cases while at different firms. Their 2019 decision to merge practice groups underscores the importance of current enforcement trends.

“There has been a growing practice of criminalizing major accidents. Our group was formed in recognition of this. Companies were increasingly finding themselves the target of criminal investigations following major environmental incidents. We offer a full range of services from crisis management, to agency investigations, to the defense of criminal and civil enforcement actions, including trial and appeal,” Nadira notes.

Wherever they worked, Nadira and Lily joined with others who shared the commitment to diversify the practice of environmental law, including developing programs to generate interest among young minority attorneys, and increasing recruitment at every level.

“You never know in your career how people are going to come back into your lives. I think from a pipeline perspective; especially, it’s really important to be deliberate about mentoring people, especially diverse associates and people who don’t have lawyers in their family. I do mock interviews all the time for 1Ls because you just never know who you are going to meet, who’s going to turn out to be a really great person. They may need some encouragement and guidance about how to navigate law school, especially if they don’t have anyone in their family who is a lawyer. I didn’t have that for sure.” —Lily

Little did they know, Scott shared a similar interest and commitment, and he was implementing similar programs to grow recruitment at Baker Botts.

“Getting to know people in the community, being out there as a lawyer who can work with everyone, being in a position to advance the careers of others, and working out these types of arrangements. It’s important to understand the role a person in my situation can play in being an ally and supporting the goals of diversity in every form.” —Scott

Scott immediately understood the value of merging the two practices—the synergies were undeniable, and the ability to diversify the environmental practice not only at the partner but also the associate level was a golden opportunity.

“When Nadira and I were looking at various firms, diversity is something we value and find very important. One of the things we looked at was how a firm was involved in this issue. For example, Leadership Council for Legal Diversity is an organization we have been involved with since its inception. We’re both fellows and have built networks there. We wanted to go to a place that supported that mission. Baker Botts is a member of that organization, so that was a good sign for us. They value diversity and what diverse attorneys can bring.” —Lily

Scott’s vision for the practice, coupled with his desire to attract diverse talent, was exciting and refreshing. Within weeks, the deal was struck, and a month later, the Environmental Safety and Incident Response team was formed.

“When Lily and I, and our group joined, I got a call from a former associate, a diverse attorney who is now a General Counsel at a major organization. The first thing he asked me was, ‘Is there someone named Scott Janoe there?’ He remembered Scott because when he was in law school at Tulane, Scott had come to speak to a group of diverse law students at the Black Law Student Association’s National Conference about careers in environmental law. This guy is now a General Counsel, and he remembered Scott doing that. Those things really matter, and it was really meaningful that he remembered Scott’s visit. It serves as a reminder of how significant even small gestures are. Scott would tell you that he was simply doing what he always does, but the point is that his actions make a difference.” —Nadira

Despite the shutdown from COVID shortly after the teams merged, Nadira, Lily, and Scott are encouraged by the strength of their unified group. “We are on calls all the time where we realize ways we fit together that we didn’t know before,” Nadira reflects. The work continues for this team of career-long environmental lawyers newly energized by a seamless merger, especially as the demand to provide legal support for COVID-19-related incidents and enforcements grows. Now, they look forward to continuing to learn from each other as they help their clients in the ESIR sphere.