

# New Jersey Law Journal

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## Diverse Attorneys of the Year

The Law Journal recognizes 15 diverse attorneys for their exceptional accomplishments.

By David Gialanella | November 07, 2017

Every two years the Law Journal sets out to spotlight excellence among New Jersey's diverse attorneys. Diversity means many things, and we recognize diversity in all its forms. Diversity is well worth celebrating in and of itself, but it's particularly important to highlight as many institutions—including organizations made up of lawyers, and those that count lawyers among their team members—are striving to do better on the diversity front. As I write this, an [ALM Intelligence report \(http://www.law.com/sites/ali/2017/11/01/lack-of-gender-diverse-partnership-is-it-the-woman-or-the-firm/\)](http://www.law.com/sites/ali/2017/11/01/lack-of-gender-diverse-partnership-is-it-the-woman-or-the-firm/) was published noting that female partnership at Big Law firms has been holding steady at 20 percent for a few years running. The report looks for answers as to why. Indeed there are many questions, and the answers aren't always readily apparent. It's up to all of us to keep searching.

To that end, we asked this year's honorees to share their thoughts on matters of diversity, as well as on matters of developing professionally and achieving excellence. We ask these questions not to put the honorees on the spot, but because we know we and our readers will learn from the answers. The responses vary in many ways, but are all insightful. We thank all of the honorees for sharing them.

We look forward to our next Diverse Attorneys of the Year recognition. In the meantime, let's all keep asking—and seeking answers to—important questions.

## Supti Bhattacharya



*Rekha Rao*

Rekha Rao founded Rao Legal Group in Princeton in January 2016 after practicing commercial litigation at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison in New York. She undertook to focus on estate planning and elder law because of an unmet need for such services, particularly among first-generation Americans and immigrants. Rao herself immigrated from India, where her uncle was Supreme Court chief justice and her grandfather was founder of the first law school in Bangalore. Earlier this year, she created a webinar on international tax law with help from professionals in New Jersey, Florida and India.

**Why is diversity particularly important in the legal profession?** When companies hire individuals who look like one another, have the same friends and eat the same foods, etc., then these individuals begin to think and act like one another; they also come up with similar solutions to problems. Any organization can benefit from diversity which leads to a rich palette of ideas, enhanced creative thinking and enriched problem solving.

**Are law firms and other organizations employing lawyers doing enough to foster diversity? What could they be doing better?** I do see big law firms increasingly emphasizing diversity – they accept a larger pool of minority attorneys into their ranks, they help with scholarships and grants to minority attorneys so they can gain an equal footing, and they support minority organizations promoting diversity. I was fortunate to be a recipient of a Minority Fellowship Award which provided me with the opportunity to intern at the New York Attorney General's office during the summer of my second year in law school. However, it is quite surprising to still see a large number of firms comfortable with the status quo – they continue to hire from within, hire less women and minorities, and shy away from sponsoring events encouraging diversity. One way to combat this problem is to encourage individual attorneys to help effectuate a sea change by supporting organizations promoting diversity; small changes can have significant impact.

**What unique challenges do diverse attorneys face—on their teams, in the courtroom, in the conference room, and beyond?** Growing up in a diverse country like India, I had not even heard of the term discrimination until I came to the United States as a young adult. To date, I don't believe I have ever faced any discrimination directly (or perhaps I was too naïve to recognize it); however, I do recall what happened to a law school classmate during an interview for a summer internship. There, she was told by the hiring partner that because of her strong "accent" she would never get a job anywhere if she spoke English the way she did. While she did not get that job, she did go onto becoming the valedictorian of our class year, then hired by one of the top 5 law firms in the country and is now senior legal counsel of a big corporation. The firm had lost the opportunity to benefit from, both culturally and economically, the addition of this rising star!

**Name a mentor, or someone you admire, and why.** I truly respect and admire those attorneys who encourage, motivate and lift other attorneys along with them. Early on in my career, three attorneys held out their hands to pull me up when I needed help the most. Richard Greenberg, who always found the time to lend a helping hand to a newbie attorney; Thomas Begley, Jr., who readily answered my numerous questions with his gentle personality and warm encouragement, and my former employer, Neel Shah, of Shah & Associates, who gave me my first real break into the world of sophisticated estate planning and who gave me the confidence I needed to excel.

**What is the best advice you ever got? Or, what is your best advice for someone looking to make an impact in the legal profession?** Network, network, network! Get your name out and get exposure. I always thought I was best at sitting behind a desk and researching the law. I even found a perfect job that had allowed me to do just that. At that time, I did not realize how important it was to drum up business. But whether we like it or not, we are all in the "business" of the law. And no matter where we are in our careers (even if in a big law firm), it is important to always think like an entrepreneur because ultimately it's not about how much we know but it's about how much business we can bring in.

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