

## How I Made Real Estate Partner and Co-Chair: 'I Earned the Trust of Clients and Partners,' Says Michelle McAtee of Jenner & Block

**"Motherhood has actually made me better, as the balancing act that is needed with kids is similar to the one needed to manage a full plate of transactions."**

By Tasha Norman

**Michelle M. McAtee, 48, Jenner & Block, Chicago.**

**Job title:** Partner; Co-chair of Jenner & Block's real estate practice.

**Law school and year of graduation:** University of Iowa College of Law, 1998.

**How long have you been at the firm and when did you make partner?** I have been with Jenner & Block for 17 years. I became partner in 2007, and in 2015, I became co-chair of the firm's real estate practice.

**Why did you decide to practice law in the real estate industry?** After law school, I moved to Boston when it was in the middle of the Big Dig (Boston's multiyear, large-scale investment project that was undertaken to improve the flow of traffic and alleviate chronic congestion in the city and surrounding areas). I walked to my office one way, and then would have to change my path for the evening commute. Things were constantly changing. And it was exciting—to see progress. I realized then that I loved the tangible nature

of real estate, and construction and development in particular. You could see the project on which you were working and that was very fulfilling.

**What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner?** I believe it is a combination of things not just one definitive point that supported my elevation to partner. As an associate I was fortunate to earn the trust of many firm clients and play a leadership role on their matters. Just as important, I earned the trust of the partners with whom I collaborated on multidisciplinary matters.

**Describe how you feel now about your career now that you've made partner.** As co-chair of the real estate practice, I am responsible for developing and overseeing the success of our group's annual plan and promoting a values-driven team culture that encourages leadership, partnership, and excellent client service. I take that responsibility very seriously and am passionate about helping our women



Michelle McAtee

(Courtesy photo)

and diverse lawyers in their professional development.

When my partners and I saw a need to support mothers in the workforce, we formed the affinity group, the Mother's Circle. This network of working women lawyers has proven to be critical, particularly during the pandemic.

**What's the key to successful business development in your opinion and how do you grow professionally while everyone**

**is navigating working remotely and in-person?** Over the past two years, I have positioned myself as a connector and convener of real estate industry clients who have been navigating the unique challenges arising from the pandemic.

After receiving many of the same pandemic-related questions from commercial landlord clients and prospects, I launched a “fireside chat” program titled “A Forum to Discuss Ownership Issues and Navigating Current Tenant Issues.” The program invites clients to hear from practice leaders and discuss their most pressing concerns. In addition to providing space for industry professionals to connect, the fireside chats have also worked as a successful business development strategy, helping me and others at the firm to stay in front of current clients and secure work from new ones.

**Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to partner in real estate?** I don’t know that I can name just one person, as I have been fortunate to have so many role models. From my parents (farmers who taught me the value and inherent goodness in working hard) to the myriad of attorneys and clients I’ve met along the way, I have taken something from each of them. But without the support of my co-chair, Don Resnick, I would not be where I am. I started as an associate in our group when Don was chair. He has tirelessly supported me and offered me opportunities for growth, even



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when I may not have felt ready! That sort of belief in you and your skills from another person is invaluable.

**What advice you could give an associate who wants to make partner in real estate?** *“Get involved. Early on in my career I became a member of the American Bar Association, Chicago Bar Association, Illinois State Bar Association, and CREW Chicago (Commercial Real Estate Women). And I served as chair of the CBA’s Real Property Law Committee. The friends and connections I made because of my involvement have been invaluable, both personally and professionally, as they have been referral sources.”*

**What challenges did you face in your career path and what was the lesson learned and how did it influence your career?** Balancing being a mom with being an attorney at Big Law has been a challenge. The desire to be the kind of attorney I was when I first started out—who would work as late as need be and sacrifice everything

for the client’s needs—was no longer possible or even desirable. But motherhood has actually made me better, as the balancing act that is needed with kids is similar to the one needed to manage a full plate of transactions. Plus, it has provided a deeper connection for my clients and me, as many of them have the same experiences.

**Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self.** Try not to sweat the small stuff. Work hard, always put forth your best, and move forward. You will make mistakes—we all do because we’re human. But all of those mistakes really do make you better in the long-run. Learn from them.

**What lessons, if any, did you learn in 2020/2021 (the years of COVID-19)?** Sometimes just showing up—emailing or calling your contacts to simply check in, without any other need or motive—can be as important as anything else you can do.