

## A Diversity Boon? Attorneys in This Wilmer Hale Practice Don't Have to Choose Between Passion and Profit

By Dylan Jackson

### What You Need to Know

- Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr's anti-discrimination practice group allows for many young attorneys to pursue their passion while still doing paid work.
- Practice group leaders Debo Adegbile and Brenda Lee say the practice is a boon to the firm's diversity efforts.
- Other firms looking to replicate this kind of practice should make sure attorneys of color are leading it, one recruiter said.

As a student at Harvard Law School, Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr second-year associate Medha Gargeya was incredibly passionate about civil liberties.

Like many other young attorneys, she craved to practice law in a way that adhered to her values as an attorney of color. But this sort of passion often means one of two things: You either do the work you love at a low-paying nonprofit,

or you go into Big Law and try to find that satisfaction in pro bono work—something that many big firms support but that rarely builds a sustainable paid book of business.

But in the end, Gargeya did not have to make that choice.

In law school, Gargeya was managing editor of the Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review, worked as a regional voter protection director for Joseph Biden's presidential campaign. She was an intern for the MacArthur Justice Center Criminal Justice Appellate clinic and a law clerk for non-profit Protect Democracy.

After graduating in 2019, she landed in Wilmer Hale's **anti-discrimination practice group** led by Wilmer Hale partners Debo Adegbile, a former Obama appointee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, and Brenda Lee. The



WilmerHale D.C. offices at 1875 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW. October 3, 2012.

Diego M. Radzinski/ALM

group is an amalgam of practices, handling litigation, regulatory and compliance matters.

Gargeya said she spends a little more than half of her time attending to the several matters encompassed by the practice group, including work for the Democratic Party in challenging voting restriction laws, advising universities in race and gender matters and advising municipalities in police reform. Roughly 30% of her time working for the practice is spent on pro bono matters, although she adds that that figure is a representation of her own work, not the group as a whole.

“It’s huge that I’m able to develop an area of expertise that I was interested in law school. You read about the protections of Title VII and Title IX. You read about this stuff, and I feel the importance of this, especially as a woman of color,” Gargeya said. “It makes me feel less like it’s something that I can just do to pay my loans and move on.”

Young attorneys and attorneys of color have increasingly vied for aligning their values with their work according to multiple studies, including Major, Lindsey & Africa’s [recent studies](#) on Gen Z and Millennial attorneys. Saddled with high student debt out of law school, many opt to leave their passions behind and go into Big Law.

“Gen Z [is] particularly [focused on] chasing a cause and being a part of something bigger. You can just see it in the way people make decisions about their careers. They choose things they’re very much impassioned about,” said Nathan Peart, managing director of MLA’s associate practice group.

Wilmer’s anti-discrimination group allows many of the firm’s attorneys, like Gargeya, to follow their passion while building

a paid book of business. And it offers another dimension to the firm’s diversity efforts that goes past simply boosting the number of women and minority attorneys.

Partners Adegbile and Lee are well aware of this. The group’s quarterly meetings, which can include up to 100 attorneys, are among the most diverse gatherings of people inside of the firm. Lee, who takes an active recruiting role in the firm’s Washington D.C. office, is often fielding questions from interviewees about the anti-discrimination group and how they can participate.

The two partners added that the practice is a boon to their diversity recruitment efforts. Although it’s impossible to pinpoint the growing practice’s influence on the data, Wilmer Hale has been consistently climbing in The American Lawyer’s Diversity Scorecard, jumping from No. 63 to No. 37 last year alone.

“One thing that I have heard repeatedly in the last few years is, ‘I didn’t know there was such a thing as a racial discrimination practice,’” said Lee. “It’s something that’s important for this next generation of attorneys, something important in the broader

culture. What’s happening in the world is top of mind.”

Whether this sort of practice group can be replicated in another firm or another area of the law is yet to be seen. Merle Vaughn, a recruiter at Major, Lindsey & Africa who specializes in placing diverse attorneys, questions how much of this work there is to go around and added that it is also important for a practice group such as this to be led by attorneys of color.

“If that’s not the case, it might be that some young folks or attorneys might feel a bit suspect,” Vaughn said. “They want to work with people and see people at the top who look like them.”

Gargeya, for her part, believes this sort of work can be replicated. While Wilmer Hale may have been on the forefront of anticipating their clients’ needs, she said, the ever-changing nature of the world and culture means there will be plenty of work in the future.

“If other firms thought of this, that would be great,” she said. “A lot of what we think about impacts directly what I do when I scroll. It’s just so in the forefront of everything.”