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TRAILBLAZERS

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DANIELLE CONLEY WILMERHALE



PIONEER SPIRIT First came #MeToo. Then the national reckoning over racial discrimination precipitated by police killings of African-Americans. This is the different world that Danielle Conley is helping prominent U.S. institutions navigate — not just to give them legal protections, but to ensure they adopt meaningful changes. “Companies and universities are asking themselves not just what it is they need to do that’s legally required, but how they can be better: What are the things they can do to create a culture that’s in line with the values they want to live up to?” For the social media company Pinterest, Conley is investigating racial-discrimination complaints by former employees. For the University of Michigan, Conley is looking into decades of alleged sexual abuse by a doctor for the school’s football team.

TRAILS BLAZED Conley developed an anti-discrimination practice at WilmerHale after spending the last two years of the Obama administration as an associate deputy attorney general in the Department of Justice. Civil rights law “was something I always gravitated to,” and she won a case challenging the constitutionality of a voter-identification law in Texas. More recently, Conley secured a judgment for Harvard University in a closely watched case challenging the school’s use of race in admissions decisions.

FUTURE EXPLORATIONS The #MeToo movement began months after Conley left the Department of Justice with revelations about the sexual misconduct of Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein. Immediately, the idea that “sexual harassment and sexual misconduct in the workplace should not be tolerated really did crystallize.” Similarly, the death of George Floyd at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis gave clarity to racial discrimination issues. Conley sees more institutions intent on creating a better culture for women and for racial minorities. “In this moment, that is what people are talking about, and it is extremely, extremely important.”