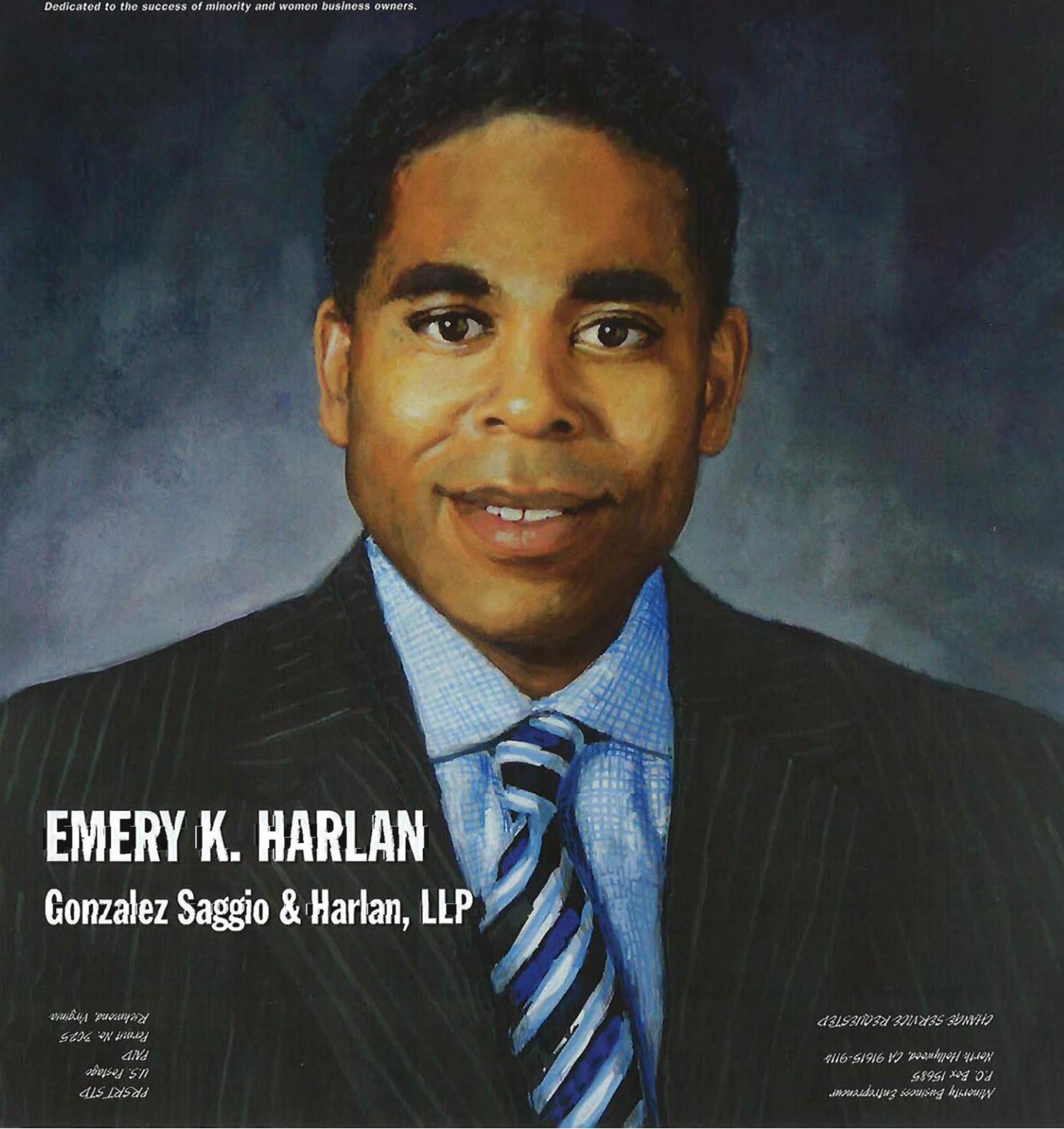


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Diversity Adv

Changing the face of the legal profession.

By Samantha Ofole-Prince

GONZALEZ

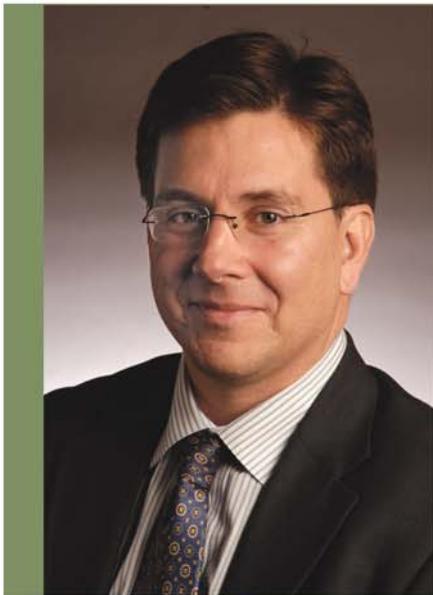
SAGGIO

HARLAN



Emery Harlan

ocate



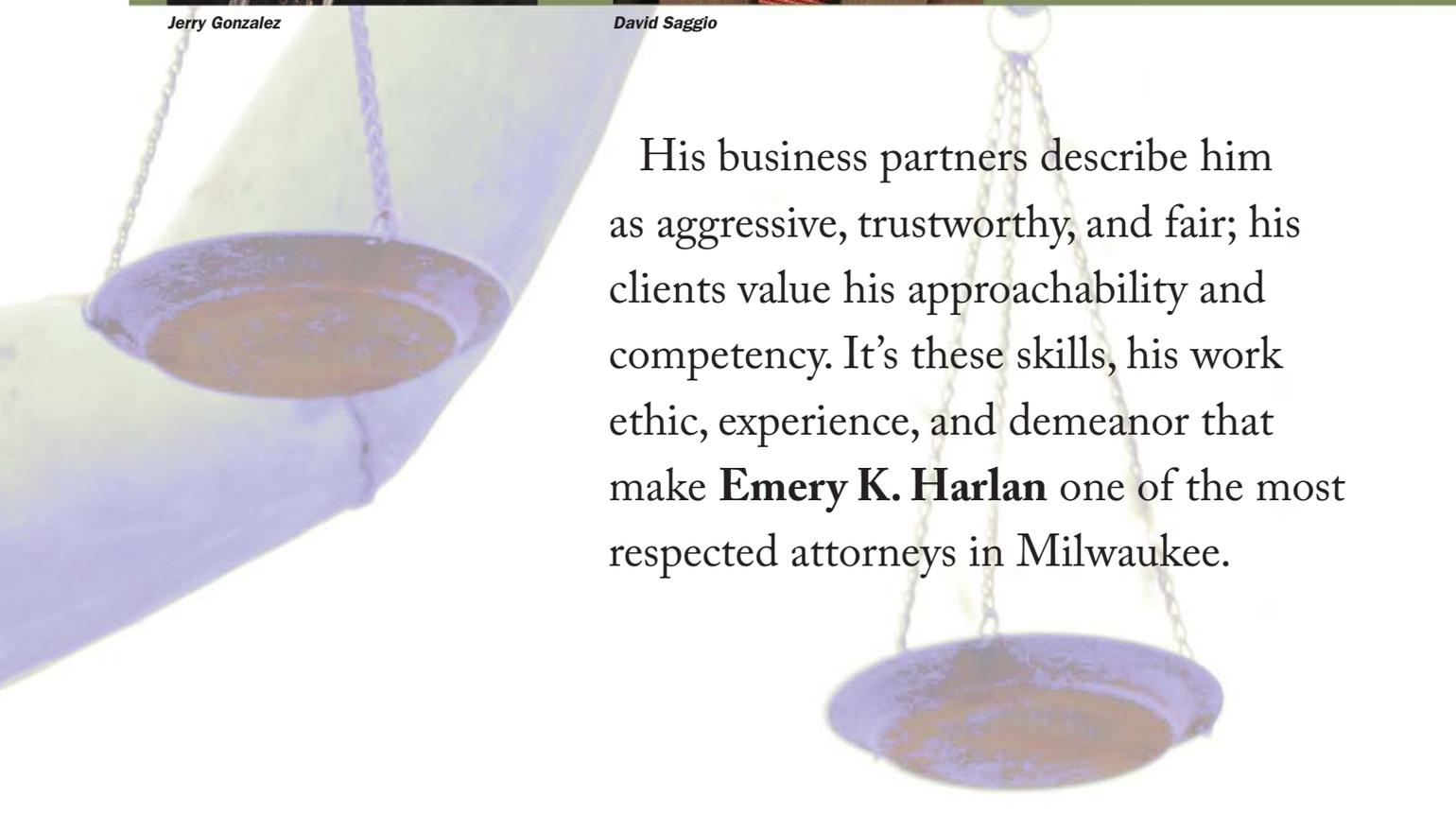
Jerry Gonzalez



David Saggio

"I am hoping that, in some small way, I can make the road ahead easier for those who are in law school today."

—Emery Harlan



His business partners describe him as aggressive, trustworthy, and fair; his clients value his approachability and competency. It's these skills, his work ethic, experience, and demeanor that make **Emery K. Harlan** one of the most respected attorneys in Milwaukee.

An experienced litigator and managing partner of the minority-owned Milwaukee-based law firm, **Gonzalez Saggio & Harlan LLP**, Harlan is an advocate for change. Since joining the firm in 1994, he has, according to the firm's founding



Gregory Wesley, an equity partner, (left) reviews documents with **Jerry Gonzalez**.

member, **Gerardo (Jerry) Gonzalez**, “helped open doors for lawyers around the country.”

It was in January 1994, when Harlan, a University of Wisconsin Law School graduate, brought the concept of change to the firm. At the time, the firm was called Gonzalez and Associates. Harlan, an ambitious young lawyer, had been working at Ross & Hardies in Chicago and wanted to develop a minority-owned firm that was focused on representing major companies throughout the nation.

“He is someone who is selfless and he is not really motivated by dollars,” says **David Saggio**, an equity partner at the firm, “What he wanted to do was practice at a diverse law firm and to focus on marketing to corporations. Up until that point, we were a general practice firm.”

With a clear vision and concept, Harlan approached the firm's partners, Gonzalez and Saggio.

“He came in with a passion for that area of law and a passion to help create opportunities for diverse lawyers,” adds Gonzalez. “We weren't

even sure we could get him to join our firm because he was at a much larger one and we were quite small. We looked at this as a tremendous opportunity for us; he was a fantastic fit.” Taking a significant pay cut, Harlan joined the firm as an associate lawyer and began to aggressively market the firm to corporations.

“My initial challenge,” Harlan recalls, “was to convince major corporations that a firm owned and operated by people of color was capable of providing quality legal services and that we had enough resources

to be able to effectively represent their interests.”

In 1995, Harlan was offered an equity stake in the firm. “Based upon my contributions to the firm, David and Jerry were comfortable with inviting me to become their partner.” He moved up to managing partner in January 2011, a major accomplishment for the 46-year-old.

He also co-founded the National Association of Minority and Women Owned Law Firms (NAMWOLF). Created in 2001, it is dedicated to increasing opportunities for minority- and woman-owned law firms.

“Jerry Gonzalez and I started NAMWOLF,” Harlan says, “with the express purpose of making corporations and government organizations aware of the tremendous talent that existed within such firms. We also discovered that many of them did not have a good resource for identifying law firms that happened to be owned by women and minorities,” he explains.

Harlan has, through his firm and NAMWOLF, changed opportunities for many of the lawyers coming

out of law school today.

“We have helped grow the organization from an initial membership of three law firms to close to 100 throughout the country, and more than 200 major corporations and government agencies are now involved with NAMWOLF. The proudest and most significant moment was last year when a group of about 10 major corporations, including Walmart and Prudential, made a commitment to spend in excess of \$70 million with woman- and minority-owned law firms in 2011.”

Harlan's future focus will be on the federal sector where he feels there are areas in which participation by woman- and minority-owned firms is still lacking.

He continues, “I am hoping that, in some small way, I can make the road ahead easier for those who are in law school today, or for those who are aspiring to represent corporations at the highest level, so that they will not encounter some of the barriers that I faced.” For Harlan, who currently serves as NAMWOLF's board chair, relates that one of those barriers was convincing in-house counsel at major corporations that he and his colleagues were competent.

Harlan, who is very active in the Milwaukee community, has received accolades for his activism. Earlier this year, he was named a 2011 Leader in the Law by the Wisconsin Journal, and has been recognized as a Wisconsin Super Lawyer each year since 2007. Most recently he received the 2011 Community Service Award from the Waukesha County National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), recognizing an individual who demonstrates a compassionate humanitarian life dedicated to the pursuit of justice.

Harlan elaborates, “I try to be

Gonzalez Saggio & Harlan equity partners



Elizabeth McDuffie



Irvin Evans



Joseph Fasi



Karma Rodgers



Kerrie Murphy

active in a number of organizations that I feel are trying to do good in the community. Milwaukee Health Services is an organization that is focused on providing medical care to traditionally underserved communities. And, I am often called upon to provide pro bono legal services for them.”

There is also the Urban Day School, an African American charter school, for which he handles legal issues on a pro bono basis, and he helps them with their fundraising; all endeavors that keep the married father of two busy with a full and varied schedule. Harlan spends most of his free time attending his children’s sports activities. He has a daughter, Morgan, a freshman in high school and a son, Clayton, is in the fourth grade.

Harlan, the youngest of three children, did not aspire to be a lawyer, but was encouraged by a professor to consider the legal profession.

“A law degree provides you with a lot of choices, and I figured it would enhance my career options,” admits Harlan, who also has a B.A. in business administration from Siena Heights University. “I had no idea that I would end up being an equity partner in a law firm, and that is confirmation that a legal education can create multiple opportunities and arm you with numerous skills.”

As managing partner of the nation’s largest certified minority-owned law firm, he has been instrumental in the firm’s growth. In 1996, he introduced the concept of moving beyond their Milwaukee

borders and was responsible for their first expansion, to his home town, Gary, Indiana. It was familiar territory and a good marketplace for the firm. Currently, Gonzalez Saggio & Harlan has 16 offices and 120 attorneys nationwide.

“Our employment practices group would probably not exist, but for Emery Harlan,” says Gonzalez. “It’s one of our largest groups, which he started when he first came on board.”

With offices in Atlanta, Boston, Los Angeles, Nashville, New York and several other cities, Gonzalez Saggio & Harlan has 13 senior equity partners, all of whom have a smaller ownership stake in the firm, which is typical of most law firms.

“Our attorneys have extensive experience in a wide variety of areas and they handle matters for mid-sized and Fortune 500 corporations,” says Harlan. “Jerry’s practice is largely litigation, David’s experience is in tax and condemnation law, and there are other partners who specialize in environmental law, government relations, public finance, and immigration,” he continues. “Each partner works with certain companies and, because we often represent major corporations, we don’t require money up front. We just bill them as we go, on a monthly basis,” he adds.

The firm’s profits are shared, based on the profit and loss of each partner’s practice group. Each equity partner in the firm has an individual profit center and compensation is based primarily on how each group performs.

Clients include many large companies



Ned Witte



Tracey Blackwell



Steven Gerber



Nelson Atkins

Diversity Advocate *(continued)*

such as Federal Express, Time Warner Cable, JPMorgan Chase, and Procter & Gamble. Rates vary for each client and are contingent on which attorney and which office is working on the engagement.

"In general, rates are hourly," Harlan explains, "although increasingly we are taking on matters where we are doing alternative fee arrangements; either a flat fee or a fee based upon the result that we achieve for the client."

This cost-effective policy ensures loyalty from clients such as Microsoft and We Energies, companies that have utilized the firm since the mid-nineties.

"In the legal services field, if you think of legal work as a pyramid, the base of the pyramid is the lowest level of work that companies would ordinarily hire an outside law firm to handle. That tends to be very fee-sensitive and is more of a commodity. Basic insurance-defense matters usually fall into that category," says Harlan. "However, we have slowly and consistently moved closer to the tip of the pyramid, where the largest and most prestigious firms reside. In our view, the way to get to that tip is to continue to attract very talented, high-quality individuals, irrespective of race, religion, or protected class status. We have a number of high level lawyers who are working in environments that allow us to be more cost-effective and efficient than some of the traditional big law firms," he continues. "And, we have found that our revenues and profit-

ability have increased tremendously during the downturn of the last couple of years."



Jerry Gonzalez accepts a *Regional Supplier of the Year* award at NMSDC 2011.

"I've had jobs in the past where I didn't want to wake up and go to work," he recalls, "but I am passionate about this job, and I look forward to doing this every day."

Still, as with any profession, there are drawbacks. For Harlan, it's breaking into what he calls "the old boys' network."

"The determining factor," he explains, "in terms of whether a company is going to hire you and your firm, is not necessarily the quality of your work. It's more a function of whether the corporation's in-house lawyer, who's responsible for retaining you, knows you, has a comfort level with you, and believes you can

perform the service that they need. Breaking into that network and not being part of the circle of people who have the power and authority to make those hiring decisions is frustrating."

Still, as the firm continues to grow, the attorneys at Gonzalez Saggio & Harlan are seeing some of their colleagues move on to positions at major corporations, where they are now in a position to make decisions about who is going to represent their company. For Harlan, that's a positive thing.

"A legal firm is nothing more than a collection of talented people who have different skills and abilities. I have the privilege of working with very talented lawyers and we are now representing organizations in corporate acquisitions, which is something that minority-owned law firms have not traditionally been doing.

I am an activist in the sense that I am trying to break into a very traditional establishment. I see myself continuing to help this firm grow and attract talent, and to again take it to place where a firm like ours has never been; that is to represent major corporations in the most important legal matters that they have in their portfolios." Harlan pushes for strategic change in the legal profession and has succeeded in breaking down some of the barriers, on behalf of minority and women lawyers.

He is, indeed, an advocate for diversity in the legal profession. ♦

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