

Session 4: Fireside Virtual Chat with Bruce Jackson, Associate General Counsel, Microsoft
(Author of *Never Far From Home: My Journey from Brooklyn to Hip Hop, Microsoft, and the Law*)

Summary of Proceeding by Jack Flint

Featured Speaker: Bruce Jackson

Moderated by Steven W. Bender, Associate Dean for Planning and Strategic Initiatives and Professor, Seattle University School of Law

Abstract: What do Heavy D, Pete Rock, CL Smooth, LL Cool J, and Busta Rhymes all have in common? Besides musical talent, they have all been represented by Bruce Jackson, one of the founding partners of the entertainment law firm, Jackson, Brown, Powell, and St. George. Jackson, a Brooklynite and longtime Microsoft attorney, is a force in the legal industry. Jackson started at Microsoft in the year 2000 as Corporate Counsel for the digital media division. Jackson now serves as Associate General Counsel and Managing Director for Strategic Partnerships out of the Office of the President for Microsoft. Jackson recently published his first book, *Never Far From Home: My Journey from Brooklyn to Hip Hop, Microsoft, and the Law*.

I. Overview

In Session four of the 2023 Innovation and Technology Law Conference focusing on enabling innovation in law and society, Steven W. Bender, Associate Dean for Planning and Strategic Initiatives and Professor at Seattle University School of Law, hosted a virtual fireside chat with Bruce Jackson, Associate General Counsel, of Microsoft. This virtual chat encompassed a variety of topics that ranged from Jackson’s newly published book to the importance of corporate diversity hiring.

II. “Never Far From Home” and the reason behind the book

Jackson’s book, “*Never Far From Home: My Journey from Brooklyn to Hip Hop, Microsoft, and the Law*”, is a memoir about Jackson’s life story. The book focuses on Jackson growing up in Brooklyn, starting his own entertainment law firm, and his career at Microsoft. Jackson stated that he initially considered writing a book when he was approached by former clients about the idea. His clients believed that by sharing his story, Jackson would help underprivileged inner-city youths realize that there are career options available outside the realms of athletics and music. Jackson also hopes his book’s message reaches underprivileged individuals outside the city in rural areas. His book, however, is not just for the less fortunate — Jackson also hopes that privileged individuals who read his book will gain an insight about what it’s like living and growing up in the inner city. Accordingly, Jackson contends that the more people who understand this, the greater empathy and investment to inner cities will be.

III. Personal inspiration for becoming a lawyer

Jackson was interested in becoming a lawyer from a young age and was inspired from watching Perry Mason on television. This interest evolved into him wanting to be a criminal defense lawyer. Jackson also wanted to become a lawyer to combat the injustice he saw in his community. While these sources of inspiration led him to law school, he ultimately took a different path because, while he was in school, Jackson developed a passion for accounting and tax. Jackson remained passionate about social issues and helping inner cities, however, which helped lead him to where he is today.

IV. How to build a support network as a person of color in a white dominated profession

As a person of color in a profession dominated by white men, Jackson often found himself belonging to a community that consisted of only himself. Beginning during his undergraduate career at Hofstra University and continuing through his time at Georgetown University Law Center, Jackson was faced with environments that severely lacked diversity. When Jackson joined Microsoft in 2000, he was only the third African American attorney to ever be hired by the company. Building a professional support network in that kind of environment was a daunting task. Jackson was able to overcome this challenge by leaning on others from his community as well as getting support from people who didn't look like him. He also received support throughout his scholastic and professional careers from professors, students, and other attorneys from all kinds of backgrounds. Jackson believes that while it is important to have professional connections with people like yourself, you also must be open to seeking support from others in order to expand your network and opportunities.

V. Intentionality in increasing diversity in the workplace

Jackson believes that companies are spending too much time researching why they are not diverse and not enough time actually hiring diverse talent. Intentionality and delivery are crucial for corporations to increase diversity. In particular, Jackson notes that a corporation's diversity numbers are far more telling of how a corporation values diversity than are a corporation's diversity promoting activities. These numbers help Jackson determine if a company is serious about diversity or just paying lip service. If companies act intentionally to hire diverse talent, they project both internally and externally that it can be done. Jackson believes that both minority business leaders and white business leaders have a duty to increase diversity hiring.

VI. The importance of pipeline work

Pipeline work is an essential activity for all legal organizations to make sure there is a plethora of diverse talent entering the legal profession. Most legal pipeline activities take place in law school, undergrad, and even high school, but Jackson believes that pipelines should go back even farther. Law firms often ask, "where is the diverse talent?" However, law firms rarely inquire into how diverse talent in the workplace is achieved. Jackson has tried to combat this cycle by inviting law firms to conferences to meet the diverse talent they seem unable to find. These conferences bring together diverse students and firms, which often result in new opportunities and jobs. While the efforts of Jackson and others have been fruitful, companies

must prioritize intentionally hiring diverse talent. Many companies made promises about diversity and social issues in the wake of George Floyd, but many of those promises are unfulfilled. The only people that can hold these companies accountable are their shareholders and consumers. Unfortunately, Jackson thinks that companies are largely reactive to what is covered in the media and shape their personnel goals and priorities accordingly. If diversity is front and center, companies will invest in those issues, but if the discussion stops and economic headwinds change, companies will quickly backslide. As such, it is important that commitment to creating diverse workspaces is long-lasting and rooted in the core policies of corporations.

VII. The benefit of diversity to corporations and law firms

Jackson gives credit to companies and law firms. He believes they are smart and know the value of having a diverse group of employees. Diverse employees have an assorted set of ideas and can appeal to a broader segment of consumers. Similarly, having many diverse voices can help to prevent corporations from unintentionally insulting a population of consumers. Furthermore, it is valuable for corporations to be able to understand the perspectives of a large number of consumers because this improves the corporation's products. The fact that companies know this and still drag their feet in hiring diverse talent frustrates Jackson. From his perspective, Jackson no longer thinks that companies and firms need to be convinced of the benefits of diversity; rather, they need to be intentional and deliberate in improving their diversity.