

How I Made Partner: 'Identify Needs at the Firm and Find Ways to Meet Them,' Says Juan Carlos Sanchez of Robbins Geller Rudman & Dowd

By ALM Staff

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Juan Carlos Sanchez, 42, Partner at Robbins Geller Rudman & Dowd, San Diego, California

Practice area: Securities fraud

Law school and year of graduation: University of California Berkeley School of Law, 2014

The following has been edited for style.

How long have you been at the firm?

I've been with Robbins Geller Rudman & Dowd full time for nine years. I summered at the firm in 2013, clerked for the Honorable Nelva Gonzales Ramos of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas, and then joined the firm in fall 2015.

What was your criteria in selecting your current firm?

I knew I wanted to be a plaintiff's side attorney. And I knew I wanted to be a class action attorney because I felt that it has the power to produce the greatest benefit and impact to the greatest number of people. And as for my decision to join Robbins Geller—the largest securities fraud class action law firm representing investors—that was more a product of my dad, a now retired custodian.



Courtesy photo

Juan Carlos Sanchez of Robbins Geller Rudman & Dowd.

My parents didn't make much money. My dad was a gardener in the mornings and at night he worked as a custodian for our local county government. My mom was a housekeeper and, like my dad, often worked two jobs to help us make ends meet. Thankfully, around the time I was considering going to law school, my parents retired. And now, after decades of sacrifice, my parents are enjoying a dignified retirement in the twilight of their lives because of the pension my dad's custodian job offered.

I was introduced to Robbins Geller through my law school's on-campus interviewing process, and the opportunity to represent pensioners like my parents was an opportunity I could not pass up. Robbins Geller also had an unmatched reputation of going toe-to-toe with the biggest defense firms on the planet and taking cases all the way to and through trial if need be to protect defrauded investors. To me, Robbins Geller was an ideal fit and I couldn't imagine going anywhere else.

Were you an associate at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one and how long were you there?

No—I joined Robbins Geller full time after finishing my one-year clerkship after graduating law school. I actually clerked in the Southern District of Texas, the same jurisdiction where Robbins Geller helped secure the largest securities class action recovery ever (\$7.2 billion recovery on behalf of Enron investors). My heart was set and I was eager to begin my career as a securities class action litigator.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner? Was it your performance on a specific case? A personality trait? Making connections with the right people?

I think, above all, the personality trait that set me apart was empathy. When you empathize with a client's plight, you really know what's at stake—and it inspires you to do the best job imaginable. I think some of the most important qualities in an attorney—always being prepared, pushing the envelope, recognizing opportunities, for example—stem from having empathy

toward your client and being relentless with your advocacy on their behalf.

Who had or has the greatest influence in your career and why?

The person who had the greatest influence in my career is clearly Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. Initially, I wasn't entirely sold on attending law school despite having applied to a few schools. Then came my first admission, and my first opportunity to visit a campus—Northwestern Law School. I wasn't about to pass up the opportunity, especially given the rumor that the school may treat us to a Bulls basketball game.

The school, the staff, the students were incredible. Then, when I thought the visit couldn't get any better, by sheer luck, we learned that Justice Sotomayor was on campus and she wanted to meet with our group. Meeting her changed my life. There I was, a Mexican immigrant who grew up in rural California without knowing a single attorney now in the presence of a Supreme Court Justice, and the first Latina Supreme Court Justice at that! I had recently read *The Alchemist* and all I could think about was how "the universe" was sending me a sign to seek a legal career. And I listened.

What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner?

Identify needs at the firm, beyond the scope of your cases, and find ways to meet them. Also— and this should be a mantra—prepare, prepare, prepare. It's the not-so-secret secret sauce. Also, find a mentor. Having a senior attorney in your firm who can answer questions, help guide your decisions, and

advocate for you is extremely valuable for young attorneys.

When it comes to career planning and navigating inside a law firm, in your opinion, what's the most common mistake you see other attorneys making?

I think young attorneys, or even experienced attorneys for that matter, often fail to recognize, or are completely oblivious to, a firm's culture and how to effectively navigate within that culture. Right out of college I participated in the Coro Fellowship in Public Affairs, a hands-on program that hones communication and critical thinking skills with a focus on building a strong community through relationships. That year as a Coro Fellow, above all, taught me the crucial skill of consensus building. Yes, it's much easier for a person in a leadership position to push their idea through—but that strategy is far from sustainable. You'll gain more allies by persuasion, and in turn, you'll become a more effective, trusted leader.

What challenges, if any, did you face or had to overcome in your career path and what was the lesson learned? How did it affect or influence your career?

In the legal profession, I think seeing really is believing. And as a Latino kid growing up in rural California, I didn't see any Latino attorneys who could serve as a role model, a mentor, an example of what I could one day become. Truth is, the only attorney that could be seen in my house growing up was "Uncle Phil" from

The Fresh Prince of Bel Air. And, honestly, watching Judge Philip Banks actually made becoming a lawyer feel a lot more attainable to me. Fictional characters aside, I think our profession is in desperate need of more attorneys of color who can serve as visible, inspirational examples for the next generation of attorneys.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self?

Dabble. A career path need not be a linear one. Take a chance on an odd job. Move cities if you have to. Go back to school if you want to. A wanderlust approach toward your career will, if anything, give you range.

Do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development?

Yes. For one thing, our firm website helps us build our brand while simultaneously introducing us to potential clients who otherwise may not have connected with us in the past, essentially creating more points of contact with prospective clients.

How would you describe your work mindset?

Treat every client like a member of your family. Build consensus with your team on how you approach cases. You want to empower everyone on the team to speak their minds because a concern now could grow into a more serious problem later. Foster an environment that's flat, so a hierarchy doesn't stop people from sharing with each other.