

20th Anniversary Solidarity Series

PBF 2009 Summer Fellow Mami Kato



While at Wayne State University Law School in Detroit, Michigan, Mami accepted a Summer Fellowship at the United Auto Workers International Union. She's now an attorney for the union-side firm of Sachs Waldman, PC, remaining in Detroit.

What has been your career path since your Peggy Browning Fellowship?

“For the first two years of my practice, I worked for a union-side labor law firm whose primary focus was on representation of the Taft-Harley multi-employer plans, which gave me an opportunity to gain some insight into ERISA. Since 2012, I’ve had the fortune of working at

Michigan’s oldest union-side labor law firm where my practice is focused more on traditional labor law, as well as dealing with election and campaign finance law. This I find to be both fascinating and frustrating, especially given the ever-changing world of campaign finance.

Thus far, my litigation practice in federal court has been dedicated mostly to defending our clients from the Duty of Fair Representation claims, and I recently made my oral argument debut in the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals. I enjoy the thrill and pressure of oral argument and the rigid structure of federal litigation. I also handle some arbitration cases that the firm takes on – it’s different from federal litigation in that arbitrations, especially disciplinary cases, involve so much personal story. It’s where I routinely run into “you can’t make this stuff up” type of scenarios, and you can’t help but be personally invested.”

Did your PB Fellowship affect your course of study in law school?

“After working for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra as a mid-level operations manager, I went to law school with the specific purpose of becoming a union-side labor lawyer. In this respect, the Fellowship didn’t greatly affect my law school experience, but it assured me that I was doing the right thing by switching to the “other” side of the bargaining table. Having done my Fellowship at the UAW Legal Department, I was able to observe first-hand that the actual practice of law involved more than just thorough knowledge of labor and employment law. For example, I changed my course selection for my final year of law school to take bankruptcy, an area of law that I didn’t realize I should be familiar until working at the UAW Legal Department and seeing how bankruptcy altered the labor-management landscape. What my Fellowship did for me was to give me a glimpse into the “real” world of practicing labor law and advocating for workers’ rights. It enabled me to ascertain for myself what I needed to know once I stepped out of law school to be an effective attorney and advocate.”

Did it help you to obtain employment in labor law?

“I’m sure it did. I didn’t go far to do my PB Fellowship, mainly because I had committed to working part-time at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra when I took a leave of absence to do my Fellowship. While I didn’t have the thrill of discovering a new city in my spare time, I had the advantage of looking for a job in a city where all labor law firms in the Metro Detroit area were familiar with attorneys in the UAW Legal Department. I was able to list attorneys as a reference that my potential employers knew personally and felt confident in getting an honest assessment of my abilities. I have no doubt that the connection I was able to obtain through my Fellowship was instrumental in landing a job or two.”



Mami, last on right, as a panelist and union-side representative at the State Bar of Michigan Labor & Employment Law Section’s Mid-Winter Meeting on Jan. 22, 2016.

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Has the interests or goals of today’s law students changed from your years in school?

“It’s only been 7 years since I graduated, so I’m not sure. But I’ve had the privilege of meeting with some Peggy Browning Fellows at the UAW Legal Department since I became an attorney, and I’ve noticed that their interests and focus are shifting more toward public interest law in general and not so much on traditional labor law.”

Are you connected to other PBF alumni? Are you active in your area’s Alumni Association Chapter?

“I keep in touch with my co-PB Fellow from the UAW Legal Department through Facebook, who is now a federal public defender in Baltimore. My firm recently hired a new associate attorney who is a PBF alumna, and I try to take whatever opportunity that’s available to participate in PBF activities. I’ve also had the privilege of serving on the panel for the PBF Regional Workshops hosted at the University of Michigan Law School, and try to meet with PB Fellows in Detroit during the summer months to see how they are doing.”

What advice would you give to today’s students who are considering a career in labor or public interest law?

“At a job interview right out of law school, a well-respected union-side labor attorney in Michigan gave me a mantra that I live by: “you out work, out research, and out think your opponent.” This is particularly true in advocating for workers’ rights – you are bound to be out resourced, whether in funds or in man power. But the other side cannot match your passion and dedication, and with a solid work ethic, you can always out smart them. Being in Michigan where the Right to Work law was passed without any debate and in a matter of hours in December 2012, it’s becoming an increasingly uphill battle. Your passion and work ethic that’s not likely to be matched on the other side will most certainly make you an effective and trusted advocate.”

“One piece of advice that I would give is to look for and take every opportunity to become a better writer. I have been fortunate to work for an attorney with an effective and highly persuasive writing style, who has taken the time to edit my writing and provide me with constructive feedback. You may have to swallow your pride at first, but there is simply no substitute for good writing. A well-written, persuasive cover letter will get your potential employer’s attention faster than a loaded resume, and in practice, you only have so many pages to make your case to the court. Having worked on a handful of briefs both in federal district court and in the court of appeals, I’ve found that an ability to write effectively is the key to advocacy, especially when workers’ fundamental rights are at stake.”