



# Breaking through the boys club

By Alex Gangitano

• Despite K Street's efforts, big law firms' lobbying teams can still feel like boys clubs, and Muftiah McCartin, the leader of Covington & Burling's public policy practice in Washington, D.C., has years of experience being the only woman in the room.

"Actually, that happened last week. It does happen, and this was a big meeting. I counted up, it was 17 people at the meeting and I was the only woman. The interesting thing about it was we're halfway through the meeting when I realized it, whereas, normally, I would have walked in and was like 'Wow,'" McCartin said in a recent interview with The Hill. "And believe it, that's happened before. I remember one time walking into a room and it was all men sitting around the table and I just said, 'Oh, what's wrong with this picture?'"

Before Covington, where she advises on a wide range of industries and issues, McCartin was staff director of the House Rules Committee, a member of the professional staff of the House Appropriations Committee, and in 1991 she became the first woman appointed an assistant House parliamentarian.

She is full of words of wisdom for women in government or public policy or simply working moms, including that finding a work-life balance is deeply personal.

"I think when it comes to a woman's decision on her career path, on her family and the work-life balance, it's so individual," she said. "It's so incredibly individual. You really have to go inside yourself and feel what's best for you and best for your family."

When McCartin, at the time a high school graduate, went to get her first job on Capitol Hill, she interviewed at the now-House Oversight and Reform Committee.

"So I go in and meet the chairman and he throws me a keychain and he says, 'Have a good time, honey.' He was just assuming that I was going to work there," she said. "I went home and I was like in tears."

She took a job as a secretary in the office but hated it immediately, quitting after just one week to take a position at the parliamentarian's office.

"I started in the parliamentarian's office and it didn't take me long to figure out I was in someplace really special," McCartin said.

In 1977, she started taking night classes for her college degree. In 1980, she found out she was pregnant.

"I was single, so I quit school, obviously kept my job and just kept trying to figure out how to get back to school working full-time and having a child," McCartin said.

She got back, graduated and then went to law school part time, all while still working for the parliamentarian's office. She met her husband during her third year of law school.

In 1991, ex-Speaker Tom Foley (D-Wash.) appointed her a parliamentarian.

"Remember that it wasn't that I was just the first woman, I was the secretary in the office. Nobody asked me what my opinion was," she said.

The office's primary responsibilities include advising all members and staff, including the Speaker, on parliamentary procedure and the budget process, drafting special rules to expedite the agenda at request of leadership, reviewing proposed legislation and amendments for conformity with

rules and to determine committees of jurisdiction, and the editing of rules and recording of precedents.

"When you're 11 years in and you're making everybody coffee and doing their filing and answering their phones, and then you have to transition to being an equal, a peer, somebody whose opinion they respect, it's a really hard transition," McCartin said.

Even with all the opportunities the parliamentarian's office gave her, she had difficulties.

"I was the only woman ... but I was [also] the only person in the office with a working spouse," she said. "They didn't get that when I left at midnight, I was going to the grocery store and that when I got home, I was making lunches and still getting up at 5 in the morning."

Everything from maternity leave to needing a pump room was new to the office, but McCartin said that working mothers shouldn't feel like the exception.

"The bottom line is really it has to be policy across the board, it can't be about, OK well, this woman has kids or this man has this, so we have to make accommodation for that person. No, we need policies that are just ... family-friendly across the board," she said.

McCartin was in the parliamentarian's office for a total of 29 years before leaving in 2005 for the House Appropriations Committee. Her last job on the Hill was for the House Rules Committee, under then-Chairwoman Louise Slaughter (D-N.Y.), who died in 2018. Slaughter hired her originally

and then promoted her to staff director.

McCartin and her husband are "cultishly public servants," she said. They had a long-running fight over which one of them would go into private practice, as they both wanted to stay in government. But one midterm election gave her the extra push to move on.

"When I saw the 2010 wave coming and I thought, 'Oh my god we're going to be in the desert for who knows how many years,' I was like I should just take the hit. I'll do it," she said.

McCartin started at Covington in 2010 as a special counsel. One year ago this month, the firm named her chair of the practice group.

"When you're in private practice, you have to build a practice and you have to promote yourself. So, to go from behind the scenes whispering, turning your mic off, staying out of the cameras, just pushing your boss forward, to being where you have to really market yourself in order to market your practice, it's a whole new ball game," she said.

She advises young women to stake out middle ground between being the person in the room who finds their opinion so important that they cut people off and being the one who doesn't have a voice and can't get a word in.

"I think what makes it more perhaps unique for women is it's just a little bit, and I think this is really changing, but I think it's a little bit more difficult for us to kind of find that voice and push ourselves forward," McCartin said.

