REPORT ON BUSINESS

CHANGE MAKERS

MEET 50 EMERGING LEADERS REINVENTING HOW CANADA DOES BUSINESS

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As an undergrad at McGill University, a comparatively multicultural school, Atrisha Lewis had instructors who discussed the existence of the so-called “glass ceiling”—while offering assurances her generation would soon smash it. Then she went to Bay Street. “This is probably one of the whitest, malest spaces we have in all of Canada,” says the trial litigator. Moreover, the change she was promised never came.

What did come, however, was opportunity. “I’ve been pushing for inclusion for years,” she says, “but it feels like only recently that people have started to listen.” The Black Lives Matter movement, the death of George Floyd, and protests across America and beyond have helped open many people’s eyes to racial injustice. Even those in law, sometimes. “It depends where you’re working, of course, but in general, this is an old white industry based on precedent and tradition,” Lewis says. Diversity and inclusion initiatives not only lack support but are actually opposed. “A lot of people in this industry still deny systemic racism even exists.”

The Law Society of Ontario’s youngest elected bencher—effectively a member of the organization’s board—Lewis recently acted pro bono for the Canadian Association of Black Lawyers to fight systemic racism. She argued in favour of peremptory challenges, a motion in which a defendant or the Crown can exclude a juror without a particular reason. Such challenges are useful tools for defendants who sense bias from a potential juror. “The criminal code was amended to get rid of peremptory challenges because of concern they were being abused,” she explains. “I’m concerned about the perspective of Black Canadians who might feel a juror is looking at them the wrong way. Sometimes it’s hard to describe the feeling that someone’s racist, but it’s there.”

The association lost the battle at the Supreme Court. While Lewis was disappointed, she was happy to be heard and represent the perspective of Black Canadians. She knows it’s an uphill battle, but also change isn’t impossible. “Although the demographics on Bay Street have yet to catch up with the rest of Toronto, and while I’m alive to how much more work there still is to do,” she says. “I’m grateful to be at a firm that is actively trying to move the dial.”