

HEAD OF THE CLASS

Winston & Strawn's Eric White uses teaching skills to lead young and diverse attorneys in Chicago

By John McNally

Eric White's road to partnership at Winston & Strawn didn't follow the traditional path of joining the firm as a summer associate and climbing up the ladder.

White, who comes from a family of educators, decided to hold off on law school for a few years to teach. He signed up with Teach for America and was assigned to a Charlotte, North Carolina "low performing, high poverty school" to educate sixth graders in science and social studies.

White said those years were a crash course that prepared him for his now successful litigation and trial practice at Winston & Strawn.

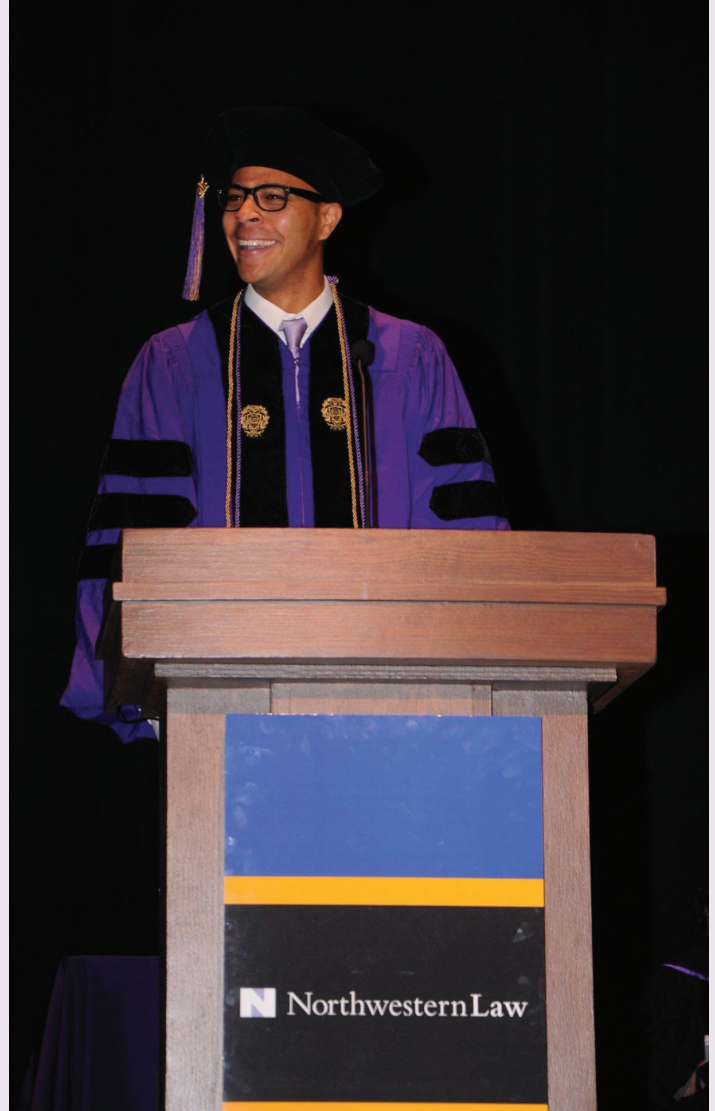


"It was a challenging school for the students, teachers and parents," he said. "But I can tell you, no matter the background of the students ... you can't get any tougher than a jury of 30-plus sixth grade kids in your classroom all day."

White joined Winston & Strawn in May after wrapping up a major project at Kirkland & Ellis. He worked with former Illinois attorney general Lisa Madigan and the Minnesota Department of Human Rights to expose systematic racism within the Minneapolis Police Department in the wake of the 2020 murder of George Floyd. His work led to the negotiation of a consent decree with the city.

After he started his legal career, White wanted to continue helping others and be a leader in his community. Being a Black and gay attorney, White believes it is his duty and "responsibility to pay it forward to others." Immediately as a first-year associate, White joined multiple bar organizations to create more opportunities for diverse attorneys.

"When I arrived at Winston, that was one of my first questions: Who are the diverse associates that could benefit from my mentorship? Who are the people on the bubble? Who needs an extra hand? I want to help."



Winston & Strawn partner Eric White graduated from the Northwestern Pritzker School of Law cum laude in 2012. He was associate editor of the Northwestern University Law Review.

White spoke with Chicago Lawyer about his background and how to continue progressing the legal industry.

Q-and-As are edited for length and clarity.

Chicago Lawyer: Why was this the right time to move to Winston & Strawn from Kirkland & Ellis? What are the benefits that you'll get from being here and growing your practice at the firm? And what went into your decision to move?

Eric White: Let's start with the investigation that I co-led with Lisa Madigan and the Minneapolis Police Department. It was just a phenomenal, tremendous piece of work that we were able to help the Minnesota Department of Human Rights. That really was illustrative of my career at Kirkland & Ellis. I had a great career there working alongside folks like Madigan and some of the brightest folks in the industry on some of the most significant matters, including pro bono matters.

I was a decade into my career. I thought it was a pivotal point to look up, down and

around to see if I was where I thought I should be for the next decades of my career. The litigation partner market, especially here in Chicago, was quite hot. I did my diligence in looking around and looking at several places. There were a few things that were important to me that Winston completely knocked out of the park and exceeded all of those expectations.

I'm a commercial litigator and trial attorney, so I wanted to be at a fearsome trial firm. It doesn't get any better in terms of the breadth and bench of trial attorneys and here at Winston's Chicago office.

Also important to me was the horizon of my career as a place and platform where I could maximize my opportunities for my clients and prospective clients on both sides of the house, litigation and transactional. When I looked at Winston, which has not only just a great trial shop, but a good corporate practice, I thought that was important for my clients to be able to give them a full suite of services and, frankly, competitive pricing.

One other factor I was looking (for) ... was (a firm's) commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. I wanted to see whether or not it was reflected in its actions and not just words you

see on brochures. There are multiple diverse partners on the executive committee here. That's not the norm. The managing partner of the Chicago office is a Black woman.

Our diversity and inclusion leader is in the C-suite. That matters and is important. As a Black gay lawyer, that was something critically important to me.

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Chicago Lawyer: You didn't jump from undergraduate studies to law school and then associateship. You taught for Teach for America for a time. What did you learn as a teacher that shaped you and your legal career?

White: Everyone in my immediate family at some point in their lives was a teacher. Education is extremely important

to my family. I always knew I wanted to go to law school, but I wanted to take a couple of years off. Teach For America was the route I chose.

One of lessons that is directly transferable to the work I do (now) is lesson planning. You teach with the end in mind. By the end of the year, I wanted my students to be able to fill in the blank with an objective. Throughout the year, you're backwards planning from that with your unit plans and daily lesson plans. That's exactly what we do when we approach litigation. (It is) always with the end in mind, which is a trial (if) you get that far.

Also, it's just being yourself. Sixth graders can smell immediately when you're not being yourself. It was really challenging for me out of the gate. I was trying to assert myself as the

leader of my classroom. I tried different personas and personalities that just weren't true to who I am. They didn't work. But over time I got more comfortable in my own skin as the instructional leader and I saw better results from my students.

Chicago Lawyer: How did you – and when did – feel like you became a leader in the gay, Black and Black and gay legal community?

White: When I was a first-year associate, I joined the associate board of the Chicago Committee for Minorities and Large Law Firms. As I became a more senior attorney, I became a fellow of the Leadership Council on Legal Diversity – a phenomenal organization made up of corporate chief legal officers and firm managing partners singularly focused on creating and maintaining a diverse profession.

I try to be a part of organizations that align with my personal mission of ensuring diverse attorneys have equal opportunities. Then I actualize that on an internal basis at my firm. I am down into the nitty gritty of mentoring diverse associates. For me that means doing social things with them, seeing what they need so I can help them progress in their careers.

Right now, I'm working (pro bono) with a few associates representing a gay Russian citizen who faced brutal persecution and is seeking asylum. It's not only helping those who look like me in the workplace, but helping those who look like me in the communities with the skill sets that I have been blessed with.

Chicago Lawyer: How much pro bono work are you taking on? How much do you recommend someone taking on in terms of expanding the zone of work they do?

White: It's our ethical and moral obligation to do pro bono work. All attorneys must do pro bono work and they should do pro bono work to use the skillsets given to help those who need help. How you strike that balance with your billable work is an individual determination. It's important to make sure that you have the right balance.

Prospective clients not only love to see that you're gaining skills and have those skills in hand, but that you and your firm care deeply about pro bono matters to clients when they are looking for new counsel.



White with his husband Nathan Aslinger at an Equality Illinois event.

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