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How I Made Partner: 'Be True to Yourself and Self-Reflect,' Says Claudia Tobler of Selendy Gay

By Law.com Staff
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Practice area: Litigation, with a focus on restructuring, insolvency, Chapter 11, and distressed situations including board special committees and independent directors

Law school and year of graduation: Boston College Law School, 1999

The following has been edited for style.

How long have you been at the firm?

I joined Selendy Gay in 2025, and I couldn't be more excited about this next chapter. Before joining the firm, I spent much of my career at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, where I had the privilege of practicing in all aspects of corporate restructuring. I represented debtors, creditors, financial institutions, and individuals, which gave me deep experience across the full spectrum of the distressed space, from litigation to transactional work to corporate matters.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to work on some of the most significant cases in the field. I'm deeply grateful for my time at Paul Weiss and for the practice and experience I gained there. My path to Selendy Gay wasn't a conventional one; I wasn't simply looking to move from one firm to another. But when the opportunity came along, it just made sense. Selendy Gay's reputation as an elite litigation firm, combined with its interest in expanding its work in complex distressed disputes, made it a natural fit for the next stage of my career.

What were your criteria in selecting your current firm?



Courtesy photo

Claudia R. Tobler of Selendy Gay.

What attracted me to Selendy Gay was the opportunity to apply my corporate restructuring experience to sophisticated commercial litigation coming out of distressed situations. There's a real need in this space for the highly intelligent, creative trial lawyers that Selendy Gay has. I saw a real chance to leverage my corporate restructuring expertise to help the firm expand into that space.

I was also drawn to the firm's collaborative and entrepreneurial ethos—the energy here is contagious. Selendy Gay has an absolute commitment to the rule of law and a serious pro bono practice, both of which were important to me. The combination of litigation excellence, entrepreneurial spirit, and shared values made this the right place to take the next step.

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

Yes. I spent nearly 24 years at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison before joining Selendy Gay. Every one of those years was formative. Paul Weiss gave me the foundation for the practice I have today and exposed me to sophisticated

matters that shaped how I approach complex problems. I also learned the importance of relationships, mentorship, and institutional knowledge in building a sustainable career. That experience is what made my move to Selendy Gay possible. I arrived with a skill set that straddles litigation and restructuring, at exactly the right moment for a firm ready to grow in those areas.

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?

Honestly, it wasn't any one thing but a combination of circumstances. I showed up at the right moment with a skill set in litigation, Chapter 11, restructuring, and distressed work, just when demand for that kind of experience was high. The practice I'd built happened to align with what the firm needed. But I also think optimism, curiosity, industry relationships, and a go-getter attitude mattered. I see opportunities, not just obstacles, and I like building things with other people. That mindset was important here. Right time, right place, right fit, and not being afraid to jump at the opportunity when it presented itself.

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

Two people have had the greatest influence on my career, and I owe them both so much.

The first is Professor Ingrid Michelsen Hillinger, my professor and mentor at Boston College Law School. She taught bankruptcy and transactional law before they were the prominent fields they are today. Her passion, her optimism, and her belief in me were invaluable. She connected me with clerkship opportunities and was a true force of nature. I'm so grateful for her.

The second is Kelley Cornish, partner at Selendy Gay. I've learned so much from Kelley—at Paul Weiss and now here at Selendy Gay. She's a driving force: positive even in tough times, incredibly hard-working, a sharp strategic thinker, and someone who always has your back. I'm lucky to have her as a mentor and colleague.

It means a lot to me that both of my most important career mentors are strong women deeply invested in seeing others succeed. They're the kind of women who make history, and I'm incredibly grateful to have learned from both of them.

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

Be true to yourself and self-reflect. If you're unhappy or something feels off, take the time to figure out what you actually want. If you do want to make partner, understand why. Think about what gives you real satisfaction, what makes you happy, and where you want to focus your energy. Then pursue it with confidence. Don't be afraid to take chances or fear failure. There's more than one path to partner, and more than one type of partnership. Don't limit yourself to a single path, and don't be afraid of change. Ask for help when you need it.

At the same time, don't forget your friends, supporters, and colleagues—and don't forget to support others. Partnership isn't just about your own success. It's about the kind of colleague and firm citizen you are. Your reputation matters, but so does your character. Be someone you like, and someone others want to work with. The goal isn't to become a different person to make partner. The goal is to understand what you want, pursue it with intention, and build a career that still feels like your own.

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?

The most common mistake is thinking that excellent work alone is enough. Many lawyers join Big Law after a lifetime of excelling as students—achieving perfect results, earning praise, and moving on. But inside a law firm, talent and diligence are essential yet insufficient.

A law firm is a social institution, and understanding its dynamics is crucial. This means more than being friendly—it requires becoming a true firm citizen: knowing the partners and having them know you, understanding your colleagues, and recognizing you're part of something bigger than your skills or personal success. Being smart and working long hours won't get you there alone. Partnership requires comprehending the institution, finding your role within it, and contributing to its success.

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

One of the biggest challenges was learning how Big Law functions—something law school doesn't teach.

Social institutions can pigeonhole people—especially women, though it happens to others too. Someone who excels at their work and puts in extreme hours can get typecast as a project manager rather than recognized as a leader, receiving excellent reviews while still feeling stuck.

The lesson I learned is that answers rarely come from outside. You have to understand the dynamics at play, including structural barriers, and then decide whether to accept the situation, work to change it, or move on. That takes courage. You may have to think outside the box and push yourself beyond your comfort zone.

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

I would tell my younger self: keep doing what you're doing. It will be okay. Stay curious, embrace change, and walk through open doors. Self-knowledge is a process; you develop it over time.

Your career may not go where you expected. Mine certainly didn't. I had a planned path, but it kept changing, sometimes for reasons beyond my control and sometimes not. But opportunities present themselves. If you keep learning and reflecting, you'll recognize the right door when it opens. Don't assume uncertainty means something has gone wrong. Careers are rarely linear, and often the full picture only emerges in hindsight.

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

Extensively. I'm a huge advocate of technology, thoughtfully deployed. When I was in law school, we used books to Shepardize cases—a process that is now computerized. I saw BlackBerries introduced, dominate, and then disappear. AI is now on the scene and will reshape the practice of law just as these earlier innovations did.

That said, technology doesn't replace judgment. It's up to us to make sure technology serves us—we shouldn't follow it blindly or assume all new technology is good. But we also shouldn't shrink from it because it's new or powerful. Our job is to harness it to become the best lawyers we can be and to continually improve the profession.

How would you describe your work mindset?

I'm a believer in the rising tide. When the people around me do well, I do well, the firm does well, and our clients get better results.

In practice, that means sharing knowledge, helping people see the strategy behind their work, and giving them room to grow, not just tasks to complete. It means fostering collaboration, treating others with respect, and listening.

My role isn't just to perform well individually—it's to lift the people around me. When that happens, work improves, relationships deepen, and the firm grows stronger.

Do you have any advice for improving work-life balance or promoting mental wellness to avoid burnout and maintain your career momentum?

"Work-life balance" can be a red herring, even harmful—because it treats balance as a fixed goal. It's not. Life is chaotic by nature. If you're chasing the illusion of a perfect balance, you'll always feel like you're failing.

A better approach: meet the obligations you've set for yourself—as a lawyer, mother, mentor, friend, colleague—and take care of yourself so you can keep going. When you're busy, do what needs to be done. When things are calmer, take that seriously too. Recharge. Be present. Celebrate what you've achieved, however imperfectly. Stop chasing the "bigger, better, brighter" future—tomorrow never comes, and before you know it, you've missed today entirely. Constant self-criticism and demanding the impossible from yourself isn't sustainable. Life is short. Try to enjoy it, however you define that for yourself.

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