

## Florio Perrucci 'Giving New Jersey a Full, Diverse Law Firm' With 8 Hires to Education Law Group

By Suzette Parmley

The pandemic has spurred a surge in work among public-sector clients, allowing for a crop of hires to bolster an already diverse staff at Florio Perrucci Steinhardt Cappelli Tipton & Taylor.

In the past 14 months—with the most recent hires coming in August and September—three female attorneys were brought in from the state Department of Education as partners to expand the firm's education practice: Christine Soto, Caitlin Pletcher and Afshan Ajmiri Giner. Soto, of Puerto Rican descent, and Giner, who is South Asian, are diverse hires.

In addition, five new associates joined the same education group since June: Lena Kim (Korean American), Kendal Longmore (African American), Reema Chandnani (Indian American); and Colleen Degnan and Andrew Landman, who are both white.

"It's part of our ongoing strategic growth model for our firm," name partner Lester Taylor said in a phone interview.

With three offices in New Jersey (Phillipsburg, New Providence and Cherry Hill), one in Bethlehem,



LEFT TO RIGHT: Caitlin Pletcher, Kendal Longmore, Afshan Ajmiri Giner, Reema Chandnani and Lena Kim

PHOTO BY J TAYLOR

Pennsylvania, and one in New Jersey Gov. James Florio, who founded the firm in 1996 with Michael J. Perrucci, a well-known trial attorney. "Likewise, we are prepared to deal with public, private and nonprofit-sector issues. Our diverse attorney base enables us to effectively interact with all communities."

A good chunk of Florio Perrucci's work comes from the public sector: municipalities, community colleges, sewer disposal authorities, landfill authorities, among others. as well as private-sector clients.

The firm talks the talk and walks the walk when it comes to diversity and has an inclusive staff that's in lockstep with the social issues of the day, said Taylor, who became the firm's first African American name partner when Florio, Perrucci, Steinhardt & Capella became Florio Perrucci Steinhardt Cappelli Tipton & Taylor in February. (Longtime managing partner Brian Tipton was also added as a name partner.)

"I am proud of our firm in that rather than just deal with problems our clients have, we work to anticipate those problems so as to avoid them," said former New

Jersey Gov. James Florio, who founded the firm in 1996 with Michael J. Perrucci, a well-known trial attorney. "Likewise, we are prepared to deal with public, private and nonprofit-sector issues. Our diverse attorney base enables us to effectively interact with all communities."

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In August 2019, Soto came on board after serving as executive legal director at the state Department of Education. Soto was brought in specifically to expand

the education practice group as co-chairwoman with Taylor, and to move it forward.

“There’s heightened awareness in this space and time for a need to talk less and just do it,” Soto said of law firms’ being more representative of the communities and clients they serve. “You just look at our team and we speak for ourselves.”

Many of the hires and promotions have come as the death of George Floyd, an African American man killed in police custody on Memorial Day, has sparked a national reckoning over race, and began a call for social justice reform and reignited the Black Lives Matter movement.

“It’s critical right now,” Soto said. “There’s a real push. For us, we really want to represent New Jersey. We live in a very diverse state, from Cape May all the way to almost New York City.

“And as these social issues came up, there’s been a keener eye on how people are really walking the walk and talking the talk, and whether you really represent your clients, both private and public,” Soto said. “We kind of were ahead of that curve quite frankly.

“We are giving New Jersey a full diverse law firm—not only from the subject-matter expertise that we bring to the table, but also from a gender perspective, cultural perspective and from a religious perspective,” said Soto, who speaks English and Spanish. “We really

cover the gamut, and I think that makes us better lawyers.”

### **Business Up Due to COVID-19**

With the onset of the pandemic in early March, Tipton said he feared the worst: bills would continue coming in, while work dried up.

But the opposite occurred.

“There were issues and new needs for clients,” Tipton, who’s been managing partner since 2010, said. “Litigation certainly ceased or slowed down for a period of time. In areas where we saw reductions, it was made up for in areas where greater needs arose like education, public sector, employment law and construction.

“A lot of this stuff is cutting-edge law—nothing you are going to read about in a book,” said Tipton. “The [regulations] and executive orders are coming out every day, and you’re just trying to analogize them with other laws and statutes.

“Back in March, we were all very scared and very nervous for the future of the firm,” Tipton said. “We all buckled down and doubled our efforts to be available to tend to our clients’ issues and crisis because they were fivefold what they were before [COVID-19] happened, especially in the public sector.”

Taylor said the level of work has been “astronomical.”

“Everything from collective bargaining issues to interpretation and modification of labor agreements, to unfair labor practices

being alleged, based upon real or perceived changing work environments, to state and federal leave laws, both existing law and those amended to address COVID, such as interstate travel with the governor’s executive orders on mandatory quarantines,” Taylor said. “Labor, employment and education issues have been huge, such as hazard pay, which is being negotiated and/or litigated with various clients for those employees who are, or maybe exposed to members of the public, patients, or others who may have been exposed to the virus.

“Those are all life issues that present real business issues that require strategic analysis and solutions from our education and labor group,” Taylor said.

In addition, funding from the Cares Act created a lot of different areas where clients need strategic, legal and regulatory advice.

Taylor said the explosion in new work and billings afforded the firm the opportunity to make new hires and absorb their salaries.

Taylor has been with Florio Perrucci for 14 years. He was the first African American hired to the firm in 2006, when the firm had 14 lawyers. It has since tripled in size to 45 lawyers.

Taylor climbed the ranks from associate, to partner—also becoming the mayor of East Orange while maintaining his practice at the firm—to name partner last February.

With his own elevated status, Taylor said he has had a say in the hiring of seven or eight African American and Hispanic attorneys prior to Soto.

“This firm have been very welcoming and supportive of me when I came in as an associate,” Taylor, a Howard University Law School graduate, said.

“Now I’m at the table with a recommendation to hire folks. This is an opportunity for me to open a little bit wider the doors that were opened to me.

“While I may have been the first [African American associate], I obviously was not the last,” said Taylor. “It’s a testament to our firm’s commitment to diversity of ideas, of experiences, of race and culture and gender—all of which leads to us following our motto of being partners in our clients’ success.”

### **Not Just Window Dressing**

New associate Longmore started on Sept 2. She was recruited through an on-campus interview process at Rutgers Law School in Newark. She previously interned with Florio Perrucci clients in the public sector.

Longmore, 25, a former summer associate at the firm, said she was drawn to Florio Perrucci’s public entity practice since she’s a product of the Union Township School District, which the firm represents. She also liked how the firm has

minority partners and women partners, she said.

“It’s no secret that when you have minority leadership, that trickles down to the lower ranks of the firm and also helps with the culture,” Longmore said. “It was very important for me to seek a firm out that showed a true commitment to diversity and inclusion.”

Lena Kim, 28, who started Aug. 3 as an associate in the education group, said she felt the same vibe. Kim reached out to Giner, whom she knew from her past dealings with the Department of Education, when she was looking for a new job this summer. Kim worked at Scarinci Hollenbeck in Lyndhurst as an associate for six months after law school and then clerked for a year and a half.

“It was the right fit for me,” Kim said. The diversity of the staff “was very appealing to me.”

“You can see it when you walk through the hallways here,” added Kim. “It’s very clear it’s not just a statement that has no meaning. They try to make this place as diverse as possible.”

Giner, 34, worked for three years as a legal and regulatory officer at the DOE and previously as a school board attorney for a boutique law firm in Bergen County for two years. In April 2019, she was hired by Florio Perrucci as an associate and promoted to partner in July.

“There are plenty of firms and companies out there that have these committees and chairs, but when you look at their ranks, there is not a lot of diversity,” Giner said. “Florio is the type of place where you make your experience based on the opportunities they give you and they are committed to helping folks.”

Pletcher was an associate at Florio Perrucci from 2009 to 2012. She worked for a year as a special education lawyer for Comegno Law Group in Morristown before heading to the DOE, where she stayed from July 2016 to July 2020.

Taylor invited her to come back as a partner while Soto and Giner, her former DOE colleagues, encouraged the same.

“Since I had been here, there was now a specific practice group for education law, which I love,” Pletcher, 37, said.

The 2008 Rutgers Law School-Camden graduate attended an education law retreat with a group of about 16 people, including co-chairs Taylor and Soto, other partners and associates, shortly after starting on Aug. 3.

“The new wave is a large chunk of talent that we’re excited about,” Tipton said. “It’s always been a big part of our growth. We’ve always had diversity, maybe not as diverse as this recent class, but it’s always been a major part of our existence.” ■