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Cleary Gottlieb has a bad hair day

Talk about a Glamour don't.

Vivia Chen/The American Lawyer
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It seemed like a nice frothy summer treat for some hardworking gals at a hard-driving law firm. Instead of hosting another earnest discussion about client cultivation and leadership, the women lawyers group at Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton invited an editor from *Glamour* magazine. The topic: the dos and don'ts of corporate fashion.

First slide up: an African-American woman sporting an Afro. A real no-no, announced the *Glamour* editor to the 40 or so lawyers in the room. As for dreadlocks: How truly dreadful! The style maven said it was "shocking" that some people still think it "appropriate" to wear those hairstyles at the office. "No offense," she sniffed, but those "political" hairstyles really have to go.

By the time the lights flicked back on, some Cleary lawyers -- particularly the 10 or so African-American women in attendance -- were in a state of disbelief. "It was like she was saying you shouldn't go out with your natural hair, and if you do, you're making a political statement," says one African-American associate. "It showed a general cluelessness about black women and their hair."

The episode also produced a "mixed reaction" along racial lines, says this associate. "Some [whites] didn't understand what the big deal was ... but all the black associates saw the controversy."

Cleary Gottlieb's managing partner, Mark Walker, who heard about the incident from some of the attendees, also saw trouble. Soon after the event, Walker issued an e-mail that denounced the hair commentary as "racially insensitive, inappropriate, and wrong." Calling the beauty advice "appalling," Walker says, "You don't tell people that their physical appearance is unacceptable, when certain characteristics are associated with a racial group." He asks, "What's the alternative? Straighten or bleach your hair?"

As for the identity of the editor, neither Cleary Gottlieb nor Condé Nast Publications Inc. (publisher of *Glamour*) would say. Indeed, almost all of the half-dozen *Glamour* editors contacted for this story professed not to have ever set foot in a law firm. "Cleary what?" asked several.

And Walker says he has no idea whether the editor who sparked all this controversy is a well-known fashionista. Not that Walker would know, even if Anna Wintour herself crossed his path. "Who is she?" Walker asks. "I really don't know people in the fashion industry." (If you have to ask, she's the editor of *Vogue*.)

So did the *Glamour* editor realize how many feathers she ruffled? Walker says that the speaker was "spoken to by one of the women partners" and that she sent an e-mail apology. "I assume she was oblivious; I doubt she's racist," says Walker. "She wasn't thinking and said something hare-brained."

Or is that hair-brained?

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