

## Book Club Combines Crowell & Moring IP Partner's Passions

By Tracey Read

*Law360 (December 20, 2024, 10:45 AM EST)* -- Before becoming a New York-based partner in Crowell & Moring LLP's intellectual property department and advertising and brand protection group, Preetha Chakrabarti had another life as a seventh grade team leader, science teacher and dean of student life at the Urban Assembly School for Criminal Justice, an all-girls public school in Brooklyn.

After five years of teaching at a private school and two at what is now called the Urban Assembly School for Leadership and Empowerment, she decided to enroll in Fordham University School of Law.

Although she is right where she wants to be in her career, Chakrabarti always held a special place in her heart for Urban Assembly.

"The school is located in a very conservative Jewish neighborhood. But all the students are primarily Afro Caribbean, African American, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Eastern European," she said. "They walk through this neighborhood that they don't necessarily 'belong' to, but then inside the school is the most lively environment you can imagine, and the teachers are great."

Not wanting to cut ties with her teaching experience, Chakrabarti accepted a position on the school's advisory board in 2010 while in law school, and has been on it ever since. And for the past 10 years, she has spearheaded a book club designed to inspire the next generation of female leaders, as part of an ongoing partnership between the firm and the school.

The book club, called Women4Women, meets several times a year at Crowell's New York office in Hudson Yards. The club brings together about 20 high-achieving female students from Urban Assembly with attorneys, paralegals, secretaries and other staff members from the firm.

The most recent meeting was held Thursday night, where the group discussed "Lula Dean's Little Library of Banned Books" by Kirsten Miller.



Preetha Chakrabarti, left, a Crowell & Moring partner, hosted a book club Thursday night at the firm's New York office with students from the Urban Assembly School for Leadership and Empowerment in Brooklyn. (Courtesy of Crowell & Moring)

## **An "Amazing" Reaction**

For the past decade, Chakrabarti has coordinated the choice of books with the teachers at the school to figure out which ones would be best to read. Once they settle on a book, the firm pays for all the books and sends them to the school. Everyone then reads the book ahead of the meetings.

"I send out an announcement to our office — the full office of attorneys and staff — saying, 'This is the book we're reading, and this is the day, who wants to join?' The reaction has been amazing," she said. "People are so eager to participate. We open it up to the whole office, but it's mostly women. We have a lot of avid readers in our office, and people are so excited to be engaged."

Chakrabarti said Women4Women is a low lift monetarily for the firm, but offers great rewards for both firm employees and students.

"We provide the books and a conference room space for the students to come and meet with the attorneys and staff," she said. "We provide pizza, cookies, salad, and they love it."

"There are students who have graduated from the school, who are now in college and beyond, and they remember the book club. They'll come back to talk to the teachers and ask how the club's going. So it's really meaningful."

The teachers try to pick authors from different cultural backgrounds, so that they can resonate with some of the students. Other book choices focus on women's and teenage issues.

"We've also read in the past some young adult books," she said. "Other times we'll read a book that's on some bestseller list that everyone's talking about, so it ranges."

## **An Inspiration**

Chakrabarti said holding the club at the firm's state-of-the-art office is inspiring for students.

"I think it's so powerful to have kids from the school who are almost primarily first generation [when] going to college or maybe even high school, for these kids to be able to not just walk by a building like ours, but come inside and feel welcome and see attorneys and staff who — some who may look like them, some who may not — but just to be able to start to envision, 'Oh, these are types of jobs and things that people do in the world,'" she said.

Besides the students' seeing women in professional and leadership roles, Chakrabarti said she often shares her own story about starting out as a teacher at their school and ending up as a lawyer at Crowell & Moring, to let them know that it's OK to pivot careers and do something else.

She added that the partnership also benefits the law firm in several ways.

"I think another piece of it that's really valuable is it's a New York City public school, and Crowell's nucleus, so to speak, has always been in Washington, D.C.," Chakrabarti said. "These relationships matter. It's not like a paid client, but this is the community we're in, right? People feel good about a law firm doing something like this. ... It feels like we're part of something larger than just our day-to-day being a lawyer."

In addition to deepening the firm's connection to New York City, Chakrabarti said it's also good for clients to see the firm doing the book club meetings and similar events.

"They see their law firm thinking creatively about how they can impact the world around them in a positive way, and that can only add to the happiness of the employees at their law firm that they hire," she said.

Chakrabarti said she hears from teachers that the students come back to school the day after book club and chatter about their evening.

"And then you have a whole new group of kids hearing about this, like, really cool, fun thing these girls got to do," she said. "And then they want to do it next time. There's a lot of positive buzz about reading a book and talking to adults!"

### **Diversity Advantages**

Chakrabarti said she hopes Women4Women can have an effect on the problem of a lack of diversity in law.

"Women are going to law school at great rates, but as soon as you start getting to the top tiers, or, like, income partner and equity partner, it drops off," she said. "I'm a true believer that you expose these kids as early as possible to just give them ideas of what's possible."

Chakrabarti said she has sacrificed a lot to be both a lawyer and an educator.

"My last year of teaching was my first year of law school," she said. "I started law school part time and kept teaching full time, which was, like, totally insane, and I would never recommend it to anyone. I was reading my case notes from my evening law school classes on the subway home, because that was literally the only time I had."

However, many of the skills she's learned from teaching — including how to make good public presentations and organize complex ideas into understandable chunks for seventh graders — have come in handy in her law practice.

"My teaching skills make me a better communicator, lawyer and connector, and I feel very lucky for that," she said. "Drafting jury instructions is not that different from figuring out how to write up an assignment where your students will be able to show you what they understood from a certain unit, for example."

Another plus is that her teaching experience is a nice way to connect with clients who have special relationships to educators in their lives.

"I really do love my job and the clients I get to work with and for — and I like my colleagues," she said. "And it feels so good to be able to add this piece of what often can feel like my former life, but it allows it to feel like my current, present, holistic life. So I selfishly, and personally, love the book club too."

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