

woman on top

“You can’t wait for someone else to take responsibility for your career.”

Marsha E. Simms

Age: 54

Title: Partner at Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP

Base: New York City

Trailblazing first: In 1987 she became one of the first Black women to make partner at one of the country’s largest law firms.

## LAW AND ORDER

At the top of her field, Marsha E. Simms balances corporate clients and community involvement

**M**arsha Simms has never fit the traditional corporate mold. When she began her career as a young associate in 1977, she walked into her first law firm with two earrings in each ear and a short natural do. She even wore red at times, long before it was deemed the power color.

After being passed over for partner at another firm in 1985, she knew it was time to walk away. So when a headhunter recruited her that year for a position at Weil, Gotshal & Manges, a general regulatory practice for corporate and business transactions, she didn’t hesitate to accept the job offer. Weil, Gotshal & Manges turned out to be a place where she was given the opportunity to work on high-profile cases, financing several billion-dollar transactions for such clients as Citigroup, General Electric and WestPoint Stevens, Inc. Proving that finding the right fit can make all the difference, Simms made partner just two years later.

Since then, Simms has made a name for herself representing some of the country’s biggest retail, manufacturing and telecommunications companies in debt financing, restructuring and other transactions. Sotheby’s, the famous auction house, has sought out her legal acumen on a number of occasions.

Simms thinks of herself as somewhat shy, but underneath her demure smile lies a woman dedicated to making a difference. In 1992 she represented her firm as counsel for the Federal Steering Committee for the

African Burial Ground discovered in New York City’s downtown area. She’s deeply involved in her company’s minority recruitment process and diversity initiatives. (Weil, Gotshal was the first law firm in New York to implement diversity training 14 years ago.) And she’s cochair-elect of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. Simms sees it as her responsibility to mentor and listen to young Black law associates, some of whom have gone on to become partners at other firms.

**On making partner:** “At most large law firms, becoming partner is a ten-year process. It’s understood and assumed that you’re smart, but it’s everything else you do over and beyond being intelligent that matters.”

**On relationship building:** “I make sure my clients’ financing needs are in place and within a framework they can live with. They’re always calling with questions, which sometimes gives me an opportunity to learn something new about the business. I hope my clients think of me as a counselor and a friend. They recognize that I know the business, and I’ll give them the right answer or help make the judgment call.”

**Her advice to young professionals:** “Do your job well. Focus on improving your people skills and letting the senior members of the firm know what you can do. If you feel you’re being overlooked or treated unfairly, sit down with someone whose opinion you value, and do an honest analysis of your performance. You can’t wait for someone else to take responsibility for your career.”

—WENDY L. WILSON